

Draco ex Machina

by John Mccallistair

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Summary: A group of Irish Catholics wash up on the shores of Berk. Faith, love and trust are all put to the test as Vikings and Irish fight with themselves and each other as Christianity is introduced to the island. Rated T for violence and language.

1. Paradise Lost

****Hello All!****

****This is my story _Draco Ex Machina_. There is now a sequel for it available at the address below:****

[s/10793493/1/Over-the-Hills-and-Far-Away](#)

****Have you ever wondered what would happen if Christianity were introduced to Berk? This is the story of how that happened and what transpired as a result. This is not designed to be some preachy, proselytizing story. It is simply designed to explore the scenario in which Christianity enters the HTTYD universe.**

****Please and enjoy and feel free to leave a review on what you think.****

****Onwards!****

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><p>*Thud*<p>

Just once Hiccup wished he could sleep in. Just once he hoped he could enjoy waking up peacefully next to Astrid without being disturbed by the steady destruction of his roof by Toothless. The dragon was quite adamant about getting in at least one ride in the

early morning. Hiccup had discovered that a good workout bright and early kept Toothless satisfied for most of the day, usually. He had tried once getting Toothless up even earlier to see how he liked it. It took him a week to gain Toothless' trust again. He had thus resigned himself to the early reveille, finding his sleep cycle eventually adjusted. Astrid however, was different. She was far more concerned with the whole prospect of a romantic morning. She also could let Stormfly fly on her own, whereas Toothless and Hiccup were almost literally joined at the leg.

"Alright! Alright! I'm coming."

Hiccup sat at the side of the bed, Astrid turning over to see her husband in the early morning light. She could sense his exhaustion. Despite having over a year now to adjust to the mantle of chief, it did nothing to make the job easier. Toothless climbed down from the roof and through the opening made for him in the side of Hiccup's bedroom. He perked his ears back, widened his eyes and exuded joy at seeing his best friend awake and preparing himself to soar into the sunrise.

"Well good morning mister bossy."

Toothless purred gently and moved to nuzzle the side of his mammalian friend. Astrid, by this point too awake to wander back beneath the covers to rest, sat on her respective side of the bed and took in the cool morning air, mingled with Toothless' persistent aroma of fish oil. Toothless moved from Hiccup's side to say hello, considering Astrid his second most trusted human companion. The wife of a chief after all commanded respect, even from an Alpha Dragon.

"Well good morning Toothless."

He purred and rested his head on her lap, content in knowing all was now right in his own world. The master had risen, there would be flying, nothing else mattered.

"And so we begin again."

Hiccup sighed as he pulled on his light tunic, curving his neck to the right as he did and getting his blood moving. Astrid could sense not only the exhaustion in her husband's tone, but the growing pain he was suffering as a certain set of days approached. One year. Astrid knew in a few days it would have been a year since Drago. A year since Valka. A year since Stoick. She knew the date would not rest easily on Hiccup's heart. She thought from time to time what Toothless thought of the encounter. Did he feel guilt? Did he feel Hiccup's pain? Did he even know what happened? As Toothless smiled, turning back towards Hiccup with the smile he used to anticipate flight, she could only help but wonder.

"Hey bud. Yeah we're gonna go flying. Just hang on."

Hiccup spoke to the dragon in a particular tone, one Astrid knew he saved only for his best friend. She knew it was a bond she simply couldn't understand. Sure she and Stormfly were just as good companions, but Hiccup and Toothless were special. She had known ever since that fateful night at the cove where Hiccup decided to protect his "pet" dragon rather than expose the dragon's nest that the two shared a friendship not even a husband and wife could ever come close

to. She understood this, and had accepted it.

She rose, her nightgown falling over her knees as she snuck up behind and wrapped her arms over her husband's chest. Despite how much Hiccup grew weary of the long daily routine, it pained Astrid more how little time they spent together. The bliss of their teenage years had died with Stoick, and the grueling experience that was married life had begun.

"Good morning my dear."

Astrid managed a smile at the recognition and pecked a kiss on Hiccup's cheek.

"Do you always have to leave so early?" She knew the answer, but she just wanted to talk. This morning just felt right, a moment whose ending would only bring disappointment. Best to prolong it as long as they could

"You know the answer to that. And you're always welcome to join us."

Hiccup chuckled at the remark, knowing how Astrid despised waking up early even more than he did. He was taken aback by her answer.

"Sure, let me get dressed and pack us something."

"Wait, what?"

Astrid figured if she never left Hiccup's side the moment would never end, perhaps a day away from the village, away from the chaos, away from the memories would serve both of them well. She unwrapped herself from her beloved and went to get some clothes.

Hiccup began assembling his armor. He had felt a compulsion to wear it ever since Drago. His wife and mother both commented that he wore it like a second skin, to the point he never washed it. But he took no chances. Besides, where else was he supposed to keep his journal, pen, sword, compass, and his flight gear? What if he wanted to solo flight? What then if he had no wings? He looked towards Toothless, who gazed out over the ocean with anticipation.

"Well bud, let's get you saddled up."

Toothless smiled, purred, and jumped out of the window towards the small set of stables a short ways outside the house, where Stormfly and Cloudjumper were kept. Toothless also had his own stall, though this more a formality than a practical home for him. His home was by Hiccup's side and no shelter could replace that. Hiccup sat back down on the bed as he began strapping on his leg armor, taking care with his left leg. Six years later, and it just never felt the same. Sure he could walk on it fine, it was the most advanced leg on Berk, and he had great confidence in it, but it wasn't real. It was a piece of metal where his leg used to be. Another piece of him lost over the years. He tightened the greave over his left leg, running his hand down the cool metallic foot, and stood up. Astrid looked over towards her husband, standing despite all arranged against him triumphantly in their bedroom, where he was almost as triumphant the preceding evening.

"I'm going to tell mom we're heading out for the day and to hold down the fort for us."

Valka was the only being on Berk that woke even earlier than Toothless. She actually had to work to wake up her dragon, as Cloudjumper required extra sleep considering his extra size. She was always the second female face Hiccup saw in the morning, yet a no less pleasant one. He made his way downstairs, his metal leg making an extra heavy thump against the wood as he found his mother as always preparing to get breakfast ready.

"Well good morning Hiccup, I trust you slept well?"

She winked at her son, acknowledging what she heard a few hours ago, twice. Hiccup blushed and kept his gaze towards the floor, then a frying pan, then a support beam, and anything he could to avoid the subject.

"Uhâ€¦yeah, just fine."

"And Astrid, is she enjoying the new mattress?"

She started giggling as Hiccup frowned at finding himself in an awkward position with a female for the third time in twelve hours.

"Yeah...yeah she enjoys the new bed."

He let the frustration in his tone quell his mother's snickering as he grabbed a loaf of bread off the top shelf for breakfast. Every other day she would make some kind of concealed reference to her desire for grandchildren, and this morning would be no exception.

"Well, it's good to know you're getting your money's worth out of it."

"Momâ€¦"

"Okay, Okay, I'm sorry."

Hiccup was relieved the issue was settled as he saw Astrid coming down the stairs. He knew Valka wouldn't bring up the issue to Astrid, at least not in the morning. That hazing was his and his alone, and he wouldn't let Astrid take that curse away from him no matter how much he despised it.

"Morning Astrid, you're looking well this morning."

"Yeah, that new bed is really comfortable."

Astrid winked at Hiccup while she set about gathering supplies. He could at least handle a joke made by his wife with dignity, though he hoped his mother would not pick up on the routine and force him to confront two sarcastic women at this ungodly hour.

"Well glad to hear. You two off somewhere? I don't usually see you in flight gear this early Astrid."

"Yeah, we're taking the day off. We could both use it."

"Oh well I hope you two have fun while I deal with all the usual complaints..."

Valka's response denoted her frustration with being left in charge. Though it was on rare occasions, the duties of caring for a village were more troublesome for her when she had spent twenty years away from contact with humans. Still, she understood that the duties of a husband and chief did warrant a day off from time to time, and she was willing to comply with the simple request. Hiccup knew some words of encouragement would dissuade most doubts from her mind.

"Don't worry, there shouldn't be much happening today, and we should be back by sundown if anything severe does happen. Have fun."

Valka waved off her son as Astrid dragged him out the door, supplies in one hand and husband in the other. As they stepped out into the grey of the early morning, they took a moment to enjoy the peace of the occasion. Nobody save themselves was likely up, the village which had been through so much over the past year stood idle, at ease. Hiccup appreciated his handiwork in the matter, all the while motioning a glance to the mountain in the distance. Carved in the rock, capable of being seen from any point in town save the low docks, rested in visage Hiccup's best memory of his father as he stared out over the village. Hiccup kept glancing at it as Astrid playfully dragged him towards the stables where Toothless was waiting, having dragged his riding gear out of the extra large stall made for him and sat over it, anxiously awaiting Hiccup's arrival. He batted an ear in curiosity as Astrid and Hiccup seemed to be racing each other at this point, changing places in dragging the other as Hiccup made himself stop staring at the statue. It could wait till later. Just a few days from now would be the anniversary, there could be time to reminisce at the ceremony.

"Alright Toothless, you ready to go?"

Toothless began to run in circles and every which way in excitement as Hiccup grabbed the saddle and called Toothless over; the dragon had by this point come to see the saddle as a sign of honor, not submission, and was quite agreeable as Hiccup fitted it as he did every day. Astrid woke Stormfly from her slumber to find the dragon happy as always to see her. She stood up, stretched her tail, let out a cry and moved out of her stall as Astrid gave her a fish she had grabbed from the kitchen. Toothless looked towards Hiccup, perplexed by the lack of a fish for him. He was the Alpha after all, should he not receive a good morning meal?

"We'll eat on the go bud."

Toothless understood his friend's tone and purred, looking into Hiccup's eyes knowing that it would be a good day. Stormfly, having effectively devoured the small cod presented to her bowed in respect to Toothless, a sign of respect the Night Fury had come to appreciate. He, unlike Hiccup, had no qualms about assuming the role as Alpha, though his succession had not come at an agonizing personal loss. He could sense Hiccup's pain from time to time, and knew it had something to do with the lack of Stoick he had noticed since Drago, but despite his best efforts he could not find the means to console his friend. He had come to understand that time healed better than

companionship, and was content to let life go on as it did. Astrid made the final adjustments on the saddle for Stormfly and mounted her quickly. Her youthful agility was still with her, and she refused to let it go.

"Eager to get a move on my lady?"

Astrid smiled as Hiccup mounted Toothless. A Terrible Terror sung in the distance. All was right with the world. Odin had smiled on them this day.

"Up then?"

The two bade a final grounded smile at each other as the two dragons leapt from the ground, both eager to find their way to the thin air high above where they could coast for miles upon the majesty of their anatomy. Hiccup and Astrid clutched their respective saddles and found themselves equal to each other as their dragons reached further and further upwards.

"Bet I can beat you to Hybrasil's Gate."

"You're on."

The two began the first of many of the competitions of the day as the sun rose over Berk. The statue of Stoick silently watched them as they flew out of sight and into the sunrise.

* * *

><p>Hiccup should have figured that shirking off his duties would have consequences, his life's history should have told him a result of ignoring such a history he now found himself and his wife facing a wall of storm clouds 40 miles from home in the middle of the North Atlantic.<p>

Wonderful.

"Well, what do we do now?" Astrid asked, confident in her husband but understandably worried. Hiccup may have been unlucky, but he was not without the gods' favor. They had flown an hour from Serpent's Rock, meaning Elves Atoll was close by. There were caves there they could ride out the storm in.

"We're gonna have to go into the storm a bit, just a few miles and we should be at Elves Atoll, we settle in there for the night."

"Sounds good, except for the flying into a storm part."

The two exchanged a look of respect as Hiccup got close to Toothless' ear.

"Keep a good eye on them bud, Stormfly doesn't do well in Thor's domain."

Toothless moved his head to acknowledge as Hiccup pondered the irony in his words. He motioned to Astrid to follow him, and the two dived down close towards the ocean, at least there they could avoid the worst of the conditions at the risk of getting wet. They kept close, neither willing to let the other out of their sight. They constantly

had to adjust for the high waves, ascending and descending with them. Lightning began to grow strong overhead, the roar of thunder barely audible over the rush of the ocean below them.

"Looks like the Skrill are happy today!"

Astrid couldn't help but joke at the unpleasantness of the situation; it was her way of coping. Hiccup had to smile, if only to console his wife by virtue of agreement. The two and their dragons were finding navigating the surf increasingly difficult in the heart of the storm.

_Just a little bit longer. Elves Atoll has to be around here someâ€" _

Hiccup's thoughts were broken as Toothless narrowly avoided an abnormally large wave, splashing Hiccup with spray as he did so. He looked over to Stormfly, who was equally troubled with the constantly churning seas.

"I don't think is gonna work Hiccup!"

Astrid was growing worried that her dragon was growing worried. Such a situation was not the most pleasant for either of them. Hiccup kept his gaze upwards. He could see a clearing not too far up, perhaps a lull in the storm. They might just be able to use it to get above the storm and to clear skies.

"Follow me Astrid!"

Hiccup clicked in the ascender as Toothless eagerly moved above the tossing seas, Stormfly more than willing to follow behind. Hiccup could see blue skies before him, just a little bit further and they could make it out. He looked down to Astrid, who was equally relieved. Then, from the corner of his eye, something in the water.

He couldn't make it out very well, it's shape like too many things to discern anything in particular. He then saw it crash into a wave, and vanish.

_Probably just a Thunderdrum, they love this weather. _

Hiccup then remembered to keep his eyes peeled for Skrill. They were known to not be friendly, especially when in their beloved electrical storms. The two soon found themselves above the storm, still feeling the electricity, still tormented by winds, but out of the clouds, and that was the most important.

"Should we just fly over it and try to get home?"

"I don't want to risk it. This storm is massive and heading towards Berk anyways, we'd just be flying with it, not over it. Elves Atoll has got to be a few more miles this way, it should be calm there."

"Fine, it's your day off!"

Hiccup gave his wife a playful look as the two soared above the gray mass of clouds below them, content to stay above the chaos until

another break in the canopy could tell them where they were. The wind bit at them, they were soaked to the core and freezing cold, but at least they were out of the storm. An extra powerful gust caught Toothless in his wings and pushed him back, but he recovered. Hiccup sensed the dragon's exhaustion. But Hiccup knew that if he wanted Toothless to fly, he would. Minutes passed, the chaos below the two continued. Silently they flew, noting how the sun was falling below the cloud line. Night was approaching. _Not good._ They'd definitely have to spend the night on the Atoll.

"Please Thor let this traveler through your home."

While not the epitome of piety, Hiccup had enough of a trust in the gods that regularly tormented him to manage a prayer for safe travels in such conditions. His notable request must have been heard for he saw a moment later through a small break in the storm a rock. Rock meant land. Land meant the Atoll.

"Come on! This way!"

Astrid was quick to follow her husband through the storm, being freshly doused with rain as they did so. The dragons were growing weaker, they could both feel it. Hiccup could see Toothless constantly shaking his wings in an effort to keep ice from forming. Hiccup knew icy wings would be disastrous.

"Stay with me bud just a little bit longer."

The couple and their dragons dodged several more waves as they made their way towards the Atoll, now coming into view and quickly.

"Hiccup, I see a cave to my right, we can stop there!"

Hiccup was relieved at the news and motioned Toothless closer towards Astrid, the two kept bearing right until Hiccup also saw the cave. It looked small, but it would have to do.

"Come on Toothless, there!"

The dragon, focusing on the bond Astrid knew she could never have made haste towards the opening in the cliff face, landing quickly on the sand of the beach and sprinting inwards. Stormfly was even more eager for the rest and charged right into the entrance, Astrid narrowly dodging her head to avoid it colliding with the low cave wall.

Hiccup sighed as Toothless came to a halt and shook the water off his body, Stormfly did the same; though minding to not launch any of her tail spikes, a habit she had found it hard to shake when startled or stretching. Hiccup switched his leg from riding to walking mode and dismounted and started to remove Toothless' soaking saddle. Astrid did the same, intent on getting her dragon calm above all else. The two turned towards each other and threw their saddles down at the same moment, laughing with joy as they knew their lives were spared, adrenaline finally receding from their blood.

"So, what now chief?"

Hiccup hated when she addressed him as such, both out of a loathing

of the title and a disliking of the different kind of respect Astrid used in its phrasing. When he was the husband, they were equals. When he was chief, it implied a dominance he was not comfortable having around Astrid, especially when he knew she was still the physically stronger between the two of them.

"Wellâ€¦I guess we'll just have to wait here and ride out the storm, head back in the morning I suppose."

"Your mother is probably worrying at this point."

"Nah, the storm won't hit them until later, _then_ she'll worry."

Astrid chuckled at the sarcasm. Hiccup meanwhile started removing his soaked armor, revealing instead a soaked tunic and pants. Astrid found herself equally drenched, and the layers came off. The two eyed each other, noting the awkwardness that approached. While they were certainly more than experienced in seeing each other in a less than a clothed state, the situation was still about; love could wait till later.

Toothless and Stormfly made their way towards the back of the cave, eager to stay as far away from the storm as possible. Hiccup decided to keep his pants, as drenched as they were on his person, Astrid took notice and kept herself reasonably dressed, her inner layers at least somewhat less damp than her waterlogged coat.

They both noted a bundle of sticks were laid in small circle of rocks was near the front of the cave, as well as a supply of wood, at least enough for a fire. Not surprising they missed it considering their anxiousness to get out of the storm. It appeared to have been sitting in the cave for a good long while. It was moist and rotting, but still sufficient to construct enough of a blaze to keep warm.

"Looks like we're not the first people to make use of this place."

"Guess not. Best make sure we keep it well supplied for the next wayward couple."

Thor had again smiled on the couple, a token of appreciation for Hiccup's prayer of recognition.

"Toothless, little help here."

Hiccup pointed to the small fire pit. Toothless understood and despite his exhaustion managed to lob some plasma on the bundle of sticks as they exploded in a brilliant purple flame, quickly catching. Hiccup went over to start putting more wood on the blaze, bending over proving hard to do with his metal leg as soaked as it was. He grabbed one log with a weary hand and tossed it on the fire, nearly dropping it in his exhaustion. Astrid crept up behind him, pulling on his back and bringing him supine to the cold stone floor, pressing a light kiss on his forehead.

"Rest, I'll take care of this."

The look on his wife's face was enough to relieve the exhaustion in Hiccup's muscles. He pulled himself up and made his way over to

Astrid's large pack where she had kept enough food to feed them in such a contingency. He reached in and found a few raw and fresh fish. He limped over to Toothless, who by this point had used his fire to warm himself and Stormfly as they huddled in the back. He gave the three fish in his hand to his friend, and made two trips back and forth to the basket before Toothless and Stormfly emptied their respective rations. He then removed the whicker plate that separated the raw fish from the rest of the supplies, and found some cured ham and bread for he and Astrid.

Astrid had gotten the fire to erupt into a fierce blaze, the welcome heat soothed Hiccup's weary body and began to dry his nearby clothes. He sat beside her and gave her half of the food he had wrestled out of the basket. She rested her head on his shoulder. The two looked at each other and smiled with tired but appreciative faces, each other's company would be enough for the night. Outside, the storm continued. This would be it for the night. The two began to eat their dinner, as bitter as it was, it would keep them alive. Hiccup made sure to keep his prosthetic away from the fire, the slightest melting and cooling could render him unusable.

"I love you Hiccup."

The whisper, so subtle against the roar of the thunder outside, was enough. Hiccup could feel his stomach being satisfied with the food he had, and the company he kept. A long day, but hopefully a short night. He closed his eyes, Astrid's hand resting calmly upon his chest. Perhaps Toothless would let them sleep in tomorrow. The great feeling of the morning returned, as if it had never left. He let himself fall asleep, hoping the feeling could continue into the morning.

To Toothless, routine superseded exhaustion.

* * *

><p>The fog left in the wake of the storm was breaking over Berk as Hiccup and Astrid made their approach. The long day and night had been what the two had needed, aside from nearly dying in a lightning storm of course. Having used Toothless' usual early morning eagerness to get a head start on flying, they returned home at a still rather early hour where still few were at their business of the day. The two decided to have one last race, and approached the island from the North West towards the mountain peak.<p>

"Last one to the bottom cleans Cloudjumper's stall!"

Astrid considered this a worthy proposal as she yelled it over the mountain winds before diving down the opposite face. The target: home. Hiccup allowed his wife to take the head start she had personally requisitioned.

"Well bud, I'd say we've been merciful enough, let's go win this."

The dragon was more than happy to begin his dive, a black blur down the blanket of white snow that covered the mountain peak. He was closing in and fast, same old same old. Astrid turned to see her husband tucked close to Toothless' head to keep them aerodynamic. He looked over to her for a moment as they became equal, nodded, and

proceeded to take the lead. His wife, knowing that she was already pushing Stormfly to her fastest, relented. Once again she lost the bet, same old same old. Toothless extended his wings to slow himself down, and came to an easy stop in front of his house. Hiccup dismounted and bowed his head to Astrid as she made her approach.

"Nicely played my dear."

"Thanks, you two."

It was good to be home. Now Hiccup could walk in, say hi to mom, let her badger him about spending a night out with Astrid, and settle back into the chaos of life on Berk. He managed another glance at the statue of his father, an image that quelled his heart and sobered him that the vacation was over. He undid Toothless' saddle as Astrid did the same for Stormfly.

"I'll be back with some salmon for you in a moment Toothless, just hang tight."

Toothless purred in appreciation and stretched his back before making his way to a small rock just outside the house. Despite having a nice bed made for him in his stable, he still preferred a hot rock under to sun for resting. And yet no matter how jagged or hard it looked, Toothless always looked comfortable. It confused Hiccup, but he didn't mind. Toothless was always one to keep to what he liked, Hiccup's efforts to get him to like eel were proof of that. Astrid let Stormfly stay outside for the moment as she placed her saddle in the sun to continue drying. Hiccup kept his under his shoulder, intending to bring it inside and make a few adjustments that the storm had made him realize were necessary.

"Shall we retire?"

Astrid placed her right arm over her husband's shoulder and pecked him on the cheek again.

"Sure, I feel like a nap."

"You just woke up."

"I just want to have the experience of waking at noon, just to see what it's like."

Hiccup couldn't help but smile at Astrid for the comment and the two made their way inside the house. They were greeted not by Valka, much to Hiccup's relief, but by Ruffnut, much to his surprise. The young maiden eyed the young couple with admiration for their stature and disgust for their temperament as she managed a hello between the strokes of a stone on the blade of a knife.

"Uhâ€¦Ruff, what are you doing here? Where's Valka."

Ruffnut looked up from her work with annoyance, but knew it her obligation to inform her chief.

"A couple of strangers washed up on shore late last night. Snotlout and my bro and Eretâ€¦" Hiccup noticed how her voice always trailed off whenever his name was mentioned. "Have been keeping an eye on

them, and she's down there now checking up on them. She told me to tell you when you got back."

Strangers? Washed up? Hiccup pushed a recollection of last night to the back of his mind. He began to slowly throw questions Ruffnut's way, eager not to overload her visibly tired mind with too much.

"How many are there?"

"I think 5 or 6."

"Viking?"

"Too scrawny, definitely from further South."

"Do they have dragons with them?"

"I didn't see any."

"Have they seen ours?"

"Don't think so, think Cloudjumper is making sure they stay hidden or something."

"Where are they?"

"Loki's Ridge, out of sight of most of the village just in case a dragon does start going wild."

Hiccup knew he could catch up on the rest later, and could see Ruff was eager to leave her post now that her job was done.

"Alright thanks Ruff, you want to come with us and check them out?"

"Nah, I promised Eret I'd sharpen this knife for him, he might hug me for it later."

Astrid and Hiccup exchanged a glance and made their way outside again, Hiccup tossing away the saddle under his arms as he did so. Toothless, seeing his master still up and about leaped off his rock and moved to join them. Stormfly had settled back into her stall by this time, more exhausted from the previous night than Toothless. Astrid looked to Hiccup, who in turn looked to his best friend who now trailed close behind the two, sensing nervousness on the part of his master.

"Just a little farther and I'll have him stay out of sight. Just in case anything goes wrong."

"Just promise me nothing's gonna go wrong."

Hiccup smiled as he remembered the first time he had heard Astrid say that. The day he was disowned by his father and nearly died twice. He hoped that the repeating of such words would not warrant such circumstances again. At least whoever was washed up hadn't seen the dragons yet, hopefully. Breaking the news about what Berk had become was tricky enough for Vikings to handle, let alone foreigners from the South where Hiccup knew dragons were hunted for sport by the

nobility of the region.

"So what do you think? Orkney, Ireland, Scotland, Saxonsâ€¦French?"

"Could be anything, let's just hope they're friendly."

"Guess that's all we _can _hope for."

Toothless purred as the two stopped just short of the ridge. Hiccup turned towards his dragon and kneeled at his level.

"Okay bud, I need you to stay here. I'll call you if I need you."

Toothless let loose a feint growl and gave his friend an affectionate lick on the face. Hiccup stood up and brushed it off as Astrid snickered.

"You know that doesn't wash out!"

He turned towards the ridge, where he was sure his visitors had heard him. He motioned Astrid to his side and the two slid down the sandy outcrop as Toothless quietly lay on the ground, his ears perked for the first sign of trouble.

The sight Hiccup found before him was hardly a comforting one. Eret, Snotlout and Tuffnut, each visibly tired from a night of guard duty were leaning against was tending to one of the more injured castaways who gripped his arm tightly. She saw her son and daughter in law and was quick to finish her bandaging and make her way over to them. The three Viking men turned as they saw Hiccup and gave a bow of respect, but remained quiet out of exhaustion.

"Morning mom, what do we got?"

Valka moved to whisper near her son's ear, Astrid kept close to keep informed.

"Six remain out of twenty, they made it here by gripping the mast of their boat. Only that one sitting against the rock is injured much though, and it's just a sprain."

"Do any of them speak Norse?"

"Yes thankfully, their leader and two others. We haven't spoken much though, we figured we'd leave the diplomacy up to you."

"Works for me. Well Astrid, let's make some friends shall we?"

"Right behind you."

Hiccup stepped forward towards the group, who began to perk up at the presence of someone who obviously commanded some authority.

"Who among you is the leader?"

A tall man in a sea stained but still impressive white robe with gold embroidery got up from the sand and stepped forward, bearing in his

hand a walking stick with a smaller stick tied perpendicular almost at the top with seaweed, evidently done in the time since he had washed ashore. A peculiar design and use of one's time, but Hiccup decided to hold on questioning such a thing until later.

"I am."

The figure, of pale skin dotted red was visibly aged beyond his years steadied himself on the sand with his stick acting as a point of leverage.

"Bishop Stephen O'Neill of Cork. And you are?"

Bishop? Was that a title? It sounded like one to Hiccup. But again, customs could wait. He extended his hand as a sign of welcome.

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, chief of Berk."

Two of the men behind the leader snickered and talked quietly amongst themselves. Hiccup had come to understand ridicule in any tongue, and recognized this one as Gaelic.

"Celts are you?"

"Yes, we come from Ireland."

Hiccup could hear it in his accent and see it in his face. While Berk had little contact with Ireland, tales of the peoples and goings on of the raucous land to his South always seemed to find their way into the Great Hall. At least knowing who he was dealing with, Hiccup pressed on to more important matters.

"What is your business in this area?"

"We were on our way to Scotland to pay our respects to another Bishop who had passed away when our ship was blown off course. After several days of battling the storm we finally wrecked some ways away from here and washed up on your shores last night. We mean you no harm if that's what you believe."

Bishop had to be the way the Celts referred to their chiefs, at least it made sense to Hiccup. He motioned to the men laying down before him, all armed and bearing similar white tunics, but with a red crossroads painted on them. Strange that they would hold to weapons when cast out at sea, but best to leave the relinquishment of arms until a little later. Hiccup pressed on with further questions, curious to the station of his visitor.

"You are a fellow chief then?"

O'Neill turned to the one other man not armed among them, who instead wore a black robe with a white crossroads on his front, and held near his heart a book. The two looked puzzled at the question, the one in black raised his arms in an I've got nothing response. O'Neill replied to Hiccup.

"I am not a Chieftain if that's what you're implying. Is your diocese without a Bishop?"

Diocese? What did that mean? Hiccup looked back to Astrid, who could only raise her arms in an _I've got nothing_ type response. Hiccup now grew curious of the visitor. He clearly held a sort of power Hiccup did not understand.

"Die-o-sis? What is this you speak of? Is this the country you come from? Is Ireland as fractured as they say?"

The thin young man in black with curious eyes got up and made his way over O'Neill. Snotlout kept a tight grip on his axe but stayed where he was, knowing he would be able to strike rapidly if this stranger threatened his chief and cousin. The man in black leaned to his leader's ear.

"Athair Naofa, I mo thuairimse, is fÃ©idir linn a bheith ag dÃ©ileÃ©il le gentib, ba mhaith liom a tread go hÃ©adrom."

Gaelic was lost on Hiccup's ears, a fact he disliked. Whatever the thin one said, O'Neill nodded and replied to Hiccup.

"It is a matter we can discuss later. Perhaps we couldâ€"

A series of menacing roars came from towards the village.

Crap.

The Monstrous Nightmares love to roar when they wake up, and it was just the right time for most of them to do so. The four armed men, even the one with the sprained arm got up in a hurry and readied their long-swords. O'Neill too looked worried, and backed up towards his guards with his black clad companion. He looked over to the perfectly calm Hiccup, who knew now had to be the time to get the big issue out in the open.

"Do you not hear that Chief Hiccup, there are dragons nearby! Ready a weapon!"

Astrid stepped forward to support her husband, who looked at O'Neill without care and smiled. This gesture perplexed the group of Irishmen, who instead kept their swords at the ready. Snotlout, Eret and Tuffnut could sense what Hiccup intended to do, and kept their weapons ready in case it went wrong. A Monstrous Nightmare flew up high into the air, going out for a morning flight. The Irishmen were startled and looked back towards Hiccup, still as calm as ever as he went to speak.

"You can relax my guests. Dragons are no threat to you."

O'Neill was visibly perplexed by the statement and responded.

"What do you mean, of course they are! They are Satan's minions, a plague upon us all!"

Hiccup could wait to learn more of this Satan character. He instead raised his left hand in a peaceful gesture towards his guests, hoping to relieve their anxiety.

"Dragons may be plague in Ireland, but we on Berk have a different policy, we don't kill dragonsâ€|"

Hiccup snapped his right fingers twice. From over the top of the sandy ridge Toothless dived in front of his master in a defensive stance.

"OÃ-che Cutach! Faigh sÃ-os!"

One of the armed Irishmen pushed O'Neill to the ground and brandished his sword at the dragon, though too paralyzed with fear to make his strike. Hiccup quickly reached under his dragon's head and grabbed a pressure point, calming the dragon as it cooed and fell to the ground. Snotlout moved forward towards the group, his left hand extended as he motioned the assembled guests to calm themselves, hoping unity in action would make the Irishmen understand the situation.

"It's alright Snotlout I've got this."

The Irishmen were astounded as the black mass that was the most feared dragon known to man lay smiling at the feet of a young man who patted it on the head like a common dog.

"You see we train dragons here, works out better for both parties."

O' Neill got up and moved a step out of the tight nit circle of petrified Irishmen, his black clad friend keeping a pace behind. His eyes could not help but glance back and forth at Toothless and Hiccup, it was a sight he had never once thought of seeing in his time on Earth.

"What black magic is this?" He moved back and grasped his walking stick tightly, skeptical of the pair in front of him.

"No black magic, just a pressure point under his jaw; puts him at ease almost immediately."

O'Neill kept an eye on the beast as his black clad friend could only help but stammer and utter out.

"Thou shalt tread upon the lion and the adder, the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under footâ€|"

"Now is not the time for Psalms brother."

O'Neill placed his hands on the young lad's back to comfort him. Hiccup motioned to speak, eager to console his panicked guests.

"Be not afraid, he won't hurt you, though sheathing your weapons would make the others less anxious."

"Others?" Hiccup could sense the worry in O'Neill's voice."

"Well there's more than one dragon in the world isn't there?"

Hiccup chuckled. He motioned for the group to come forward, reluctantly sheathing their swords as they did so by the bishop's order. He stepped over Toothless and grabbed the Bishop lightly by his robes and brought him up the sandy embankment. The others watched as the two mounted over the ridge. When O'Neill saw a multitude of

dragons flying over Berk, and a Zipplback being led by another citizen towards the woods, he dropped to his knees, gripped his walking stick and moved his hands over his body in a peculiar gesture to Hiccup.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy nameâ€¦."

Hiccup turned to look down the ridge towards Valka and Astrid, they met each other by throwing their arms up in the air in an "I've got nothing" gesture. Snotlout, Eret and Tuffnut had by this point gotten the rest of the Irishmen walking up to the ridge as Astrid kept Toothless down on the ground, knowing any sudden movement on his part could disturb the delicate situation. When the group made their way up over the ridge they too were left in awe and fear.

"What should we do with them?" Snotlout asked Hiccup. The chief considered it a moment before responding.

"Put them in the empty warehouse near the docks, they should be comfortable there."

O'Neill eyed Hiccup and got up from his knees.

"And what are we to do there?" He was frustrated, frightened, but curious. He wasn't sure which was the best way to handle the situation, and knew the quicker he could get out of it, the better.

"We'll bring some supplies down to you and call you up the Great Hall for dinner, there we can talk more about your wreck and theâ€¦uhâ€¦ dragons. Until then, we'll need to relinquish your men of their weapons."

O'Neill eyed his compatriots and uttered:

"Mo dheartháireacha, scaradh do claimhte dá³, tá muid i dea-cháram do anois."

The four with swords removed them and handed them over to Eret who collected them.

"Eret? Will you please escort our guests to their residence?"

"...Son of Eret, and yes my Chief. Follow me lads"

"Lean má^o mo dheartháireacha."

O' Neill led his companions behind Eret as they made the trek towards the docks. Astrid and Snotlout stood by Hiccup's opposite sides. Astrid was first to break the silence as the group were led towards the village and down towards the docks.

"Well that was...different."

"Yes, yes it was."

"Well then what do we do with them now?"

Snotlout asked, not exactly thrilled about the new guests.

"We treat them as we would any other stranger who comes to Berk."

"They don't seem too happy about the dragons."

Astrid added, bringing up a point already know to all.

"It's nothing we haven't dealt with before. They may be strange, but we'll change them in time."

"They're weird, I don't like them." Tuffnut nearly shouted, as he finally crawled over the sandy ridge.

"We don't know enough about them yet to cast judgment, let's see how dinner goes and take it from there."

"I suppose I'll arrange for a special feast for them?"

Valka exclaimed with her seemingly always present laugh. It hadn't occurred to Hiccup, but a show of bounty might be just what these travelers needed after such a long journey.

"Actually...yeah, let's see what we can throw together."

The smile on Valka's quickly face faded as she eyed her son.

"I suppose I'll get some of the other mothers to help meâ€¦"

Her smile returned as she knew she had walked herself into a day of cooking.

"I hope you know what you're doing Hiccup." Astrid looked to her husband with the faintest of smiles, one that cast both confidence and doubt on her husband.

"Don't I always?"

"No."

The two stared into each other's eyes and laughed.

2. Irish Diplomacy

****Irish Diplomacy-The art of telling a man to go to Hell so that he looks forward to taking the trip.****

* * *

><p>The torches that lined the Great Hall flickered calmly as the building was packed to the brim, with the entire village eager to feast near and view the strange Irishmen who had washed up on their shores. Hiccup sat at the front of the hall, Astrid and Valka at his right and left respectively, with a seat open between Valka and Hiccup for O'Neill to sit. Toothless sat behind him, both as a guard and a guest. While most dragons were prohibited from the Great Hall-especially at dinners- Toothless was always welcome for his disciplined demeanor and his closeness to his master. Hiccup also figured that if he could demonstrate to his guests that a Night Fury,

the most feared dragon they knew could be a docile friend, it would make the adjustment to conditions on Berk easier for them. He was very curious about these Irishmen. The way they dressed, the way they carried themselves, and about this title of "Bishop". It didn't sound like a very intimidating title, and certainly not one Hiccup had heard given to other chiefs either in his time or in the past. The way in which the others seemed to follow him was also curious to Hiccup. He was certainly a leader, but a leader of what? And of whom? The doors to the Hall opened slightly as Eret, son of Eret stepped in while a quiet came over the assembled masses.<p>

The moment had come.

"This will be good." Astrid leaned over to Hiccup and whispered in his ear, her feminine intuition whispering to her that a show was awaiting them.

"My good Chief, I present Bishop Stephen O'Neill of Cork and his retinue!"

The gates were flung open, welcoming the cool night air into the Hall as O'Neill led his men inside with what Astrid had properly predicted as an entertaining display. O'Neill stood in front, his odd walking stick held up by both his hands. His black clad assistant stood directly behind him, holding high above his head the book Hiccup had seen on his person earlier. It was certainly of importance to the group, Hiccup could surmise that much. Behind O'Neill and his assistant were the four warriors, their heads looking towards the floor and the hands clasping each other. The silence in the hall that had been of curiosity now turned to an awkward skepticism as the six were shown by Eret, son of Eret to their seats, O'Neill being specially presented to Hiccup. Hiccup got up from his chair to once again shake the Irishman's bony but calloused hand.

"Bishop, please be seated, we shall be eating shortly."

The affairs of diplomacy had begun. Hiccup was in his element, even if O'Neill felt out of his. The Bishop gestured to Toothless, who laid down behind the two, keeping a watchful eye on the stranger out of concern for his friend.

"Must the beast eat with us?" The bishop asked with mild dismay and a touch of fear. Hiccup knew it would take longer than he thought to change the heart of his guest, but he managed to keep a diplomatic smile as he gestured the man to sit.

"Toothless will stay here, he will cause you no harm."

"Toothless? Odd name for such a wicked creature isn't it?"

"It's a long story, now please let me pour you some mead. "

Hiccup filled a golden goblet with the rich yellow drink and with his own raised himself up to give a toast.

"To our Irish guests, for whom we have the deepest sympathies for your troubles, we welcome you all to Berk and wish the best for your stay!"

The hall momentarily erupted with a cheer from all guests to agree

with their chief and host before going back to the business of talking about the strange guests and anticipating platefuls of boar.

"Thank you Chief Hiccup, it is a pleasure to be here under your care."

"It is my honor to have you Bishop." Hiccup wasn't sure what the title he was honoring meant, but diplomacy does call for unexplained niceties. "To your left is my mother Valka, and to my right is my wife Astrid."

The bishop looked to both in turn and merely nodded his head and said hello. While Hiccup found the lack of enthusiasm in meeting two such fine ladies irritating, he remembered to keep his calm.

"We will be served now Bishop. I hope you're hungry."

"Of course Chief, my compatriots and I are very thankful for your hospitality. "

A young girl carrying a full boar that weighed just as much if not as much as her carefully positioned the decorated pig between Hiccup and his guest. Valka had clearly done her best to organize an effective roast for the guest of the Chief. Hiccup motioned towards the pig and flattened his hand.

"Please, as my guest you should take the first cut."

"Thank you Chief."

At this point the Bishop pulled from under his robe what Hiccup took to be a small talisman. He held it in front of the pig with a reverence Hiccup had never seen displayed in other eating rituals. It looked much like, if not exactly like the crossroads pattern born on the robes of his retinue. He then whispered something in a tongue Hiccup could not understand, it definitely being neither Norse nor Gaelic. Hiccup turned to Astrid who could only give the already common _I've got nothing_ response with her arms as the Bishop finished his ritual. With this, the talisman went back beneath his robes and the Bishop took a knife and carved into the boar. Hiccup's fascination with the guest's odd customs was driving him mad, but he knew it was still best to approach these things slowly. He was relieved when O'Neill carved out a piece even larger than what Hiccup had expected from the beast and handed the carving knife to Hiccup.

At least he eats like a Viking.

The Bishop then made a hand gesture over his food much like the one he had made earlier on top of Loki's ridge, and then began to carve the meat with his smaller, personal knife. Valka was the next to dig in, and the hog was supplanted by a second placed further down the table. As Hiccup began to eat, a boar was placed on the table in front of him where O'Neill's guests sat. They each took out a similar talisman and performed the same ritual in a foreign tongue Hiccup was confounded by. Many a Berkian in the hall eyed them carefully as they did so, perplexed as much as Hiccup was by the odd custom. As Hiccup swallowed his first piece of surprisingly well cooked pork, he turned to O'Neill who was as eager as he to begin discussing each other's

ways.

"So Bishop, you say you come from Ireland, whereabouts again?"

"Cork, a small town to the far South of the island. It is there I am stationed."

Now was the moment Hiccup had been waiting for. "And what is it you do in Cork?"

O'Neill's eyes gave away his sense of fear on broaching the topic. Still, he composed himself and responded.

"I am the head of the churches in the area. It is why I have my title of Bishop; it signifies my authority over these churches."

_Church? What was a church? _

"These churches, they are like other chiefdoms then? You rule over them, collect taxes for protection and such?"

O'Neill knew it was time to get into specific details. He had made himself aware he was dealing with pagans and was resolved to try and explain his vocation as delicately as he could. He tightened the grip on his knife just in case something went wrong.

"No, no. A church is merely a building whereâ€|"

"So you are a landlord?"

"No, no. A church is a meeting place for the people to pray, where we give reverence to God and his son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Iâ€|I am the leader of the churches around Cork, the leader of the people in their aim for spiritual guidance."

Now it was out. Hiccup took a moment to absorb what he had heard. He had heard a few stories from traders of a great warrior from very far south, one who was said to vanquish devils and dragons. Hiccup had assumed it was a powerful warlord stuck in the old ways, but the resemblance of names was startling to him. Did the people of Ireland worship a dragon killer? He knew not to press too hard, and as he finished his next piece of meat he changed the subject.

"And your retinue, where do they fit into all this?"

"Ah, they are all that remains of the many I intended to bring with me to Scotland. The four knights are Sir's Matthew Hennessey, Mark Hennessey, Luke O'Gara and John O'Conner. The man in black who holds our Bible is Daniel O'Rourke, a Deacon in my own church and my apprentice. I had two other Deacon's with me, but...they are in God's hands now."

O'Neill spoke with a confidence about his profession now that he was assured that Hiccup was not intent to immediately kill him. Instead, the Chief was more curious than ever about his guest. Deacon? Knights? Bible? The Irish were indeed a strange people, still he pressed forward as he took a sip of mead.

"The book, the one thisâ€|deeâ€|canâ€| carries with him, what is so

important about it?"

"Deacon! Bring me the Bible so that I may show it to our host!"

The slim figure kept his head down as he presented the thick, brown leather-bound book to the Bishop, who had wiped his hands thoroughly before handling it. Hiccup was impressed with the reverence the bishop showed towards the text, having never before seen such respect given to simple parchment.

"This, my host is the Bible. It contains the words of God and His Son in all their divine wisdom. It is what guides us in our daily lives and is the word by which we live."

Valka eyed the Bishop with the same curiosity as Hiccup as the Bishop kissed the book and handed it back to the deacon for safekeeping.

"Look after the word my child."

"Yes father." The deacon's voice was low and soft, its Irish intonations making the voice waver off into the chaos of the hall as the slim black clad figure merely nodded and received the book and went back to his seat. The knights were quick to lean in to ask him about their host in the Gaelic tongue.

As O'Neill took a sip of mead Hiccup wondered where to go next. He figured his guests meant them no harm, so it was best to enjoy the evening as best they could. He could get more intimate details of their ways and customs tomorrow. But now came the most delicate issue of the evening, the dragon in the room, and the multitudes outside.

"I suppose you have many questions concerning the dragons."

O'Neill looked behind him at the dozing Night Fury curled up in a ball. The unholy offspring of lightning and death itself was undeniably adorable in its current stance, but no less a dragon.

"Yes—many indeed. How have you come to gain their cooperation? In Ireland they are a constant menace, although our noble knights have done well in vanquishing them. O'Conner alone has killed seven these past two years, and his skills with the long-sword are very impressive. Have you managed to force them into submission somehow?"

Toothless, understanding the negative pairings of the words "kill" and "dragons" rose from his rest and took his place by Hiccup's back, O'Neill trying to subtly keep his distance in his chair. Hiccup was troubled by the ignorance many still held towards dragons and that violence between them and humans was still such a problem down South. Still he kept his peace and moved his left hand over to O'Neill, trying to grasp his guest's right hand as the bishop's eyes quickly started glancing in every direction.

"What are you doing?"

O'Neill knew enough of the tenseness of the situation to keep his voice down so as to not to disturb the rest of the hall and bring

attention to himself, but Astrid, Valka and the retinue sitting perpendicular to them were enough glaring eyes to make the situation awkward.

"It's okay, he won't hurt you."

O'Neill cautiously kept a steady hand as Hiccup brought it slowly towards Toothless' head. Hiccup hoped he could recreate the magic that had happened between him and Toothless one fateful night six years ago, when both their lives had changed forever in a cove near Raven's Point. Toothless finished what Hiccup intended, placing his face in the palm of the aged Irishman. Hiccup looked to the face of the Bishop, hoping to see the same relief of fear that he had seen in so many to whom the same circumstances had befallen. Instead, he was disappointed that despite Toothless' smile at smelling pork on the hand of the Irishman, only consternation and worry appeared on the Bishop's face. As soon as Hiccup lowered his grip the Bishop quickly pulled his hand away and dunked it into his washbowl.

Toothless was motioned down by Hiccup who tossed the dragon a piece of pork for his efforts. Though the dragon usually disliked cooked food, Hiccup had made sure to have the food cooked with mountain mint so as to keep the dragon at his calmest, and the intoxicating aroma of burning mountain mint proved too much for Toothless to maintain his diet of raw fish.

"It's alright Bishop, it takes for some people to adjust than others. My wife almost killed him first time they met, and now they're the best of friends!"

Hiccup looked towards his wife for backup, knowing that the situation was not at its best. Turning back to O'Neill he saw the worry on the faces of the assembled Knights, who held their knives tightly in the presence of the Night Fury.

"I'm sorry...perhaps not tonight."

"I understand."

Filling a need to regain the momentum of progress they were having before the reptilian interlude, O'Neill took his goblet and stood up, beckoning the attention of the entire hall who were eager to hear the leader of the strange Celts who sat in their midst. He raised his goblet, and his retinue with great respect turned towards him and bowed their heads. Hiccup noted how much respect they held towards the Bishop.

"People of Berk, It is with great honor that I would like to thank your Chief for taking us in during these troubling times. I hope that we may get to know each other better over these next few days, and that we may become good friends. May God bless you all and your Chief for the rest of your days!"

"Amen!" A strange chant came up from the Bishop's followers, proclaimed loudly by the knights but gently by the deacon. They were the lone voices in the hall. The rest merely viewed the Bishop with curiosity, and the increasingly drunken Irishmen below their chief with apprehension, their voices growing louder as the mead in their goblets grew less. Hiccup nearly slammed his head with his hand, but caught himself and feigned fatigue. He knew tomorrow there would

endless questions from the villagers about the strangers and their customs.

Astrid, who had little to do as Hiccup did his best to learn about his guest kept an eye upon the Irishmen, who mostly talked amongst themselves. All but the deacon, who was quiet. His long, stringy black hair seemed to meld with his robe as he quietly ate a small portion of boar and kept to himself, allowing the knights to amuse themselves in Gaelic with what Astrid could only assume to be boasts and jests. The deacon seemed uninterested in such things. He only cut his meat with one hand, his other resting upon the book that had been shown to the table. He seemed to be protecting the text, and despite whatever logical argument Astrid tried to establish, she could not figure out what was so special about it. She knew she would find out in time, but resolved to let that time be another day and to enjoy the slow harp music that had started in the corner of the hall.

"Chief Hiccup, I am truly sincere in my blessing. You could never understand my thanks for your hospitality." Hiccup nodded his head in appreciation of the compliment, knowing that the night could now proceed. O'Neill raised his goblet to toast the Chief, who complied and returned the gesture. They went back to eating in relative silence, the knights growing louder with every passing minute. A diplomatic disaster had been averted for the time being, just another day being chief of Berk.

* * *

><p>Toothless banked left hard as Hiccup shouted at the top of his lungs with joy. The usual early morning routine went on as usual into late morning with intense acrobatics and maneuvers that wore Toothless down for most of the day. They skimmed the water, Hiccup extending a hand to catch the mist as they flew close to the gentle waves. He kicked in the ascender, and the two raced towards the sky, flying well over Berk's peak for one last maneuver. When they had gone above the clouds, they hung momentarily in the air, Toothless grinning as they began their last plummet. They dived through the clouds, moisture accumulating upon them as they continued their dive towards home. Toothless began to shriek as he usually did when they gathered enough speed, a sound that had once struck fear into the heart of the village now signified that the Chief had returned from his hallowed morning flight. Toothless extended his wings as he slowed himself down, perfectly aimed towards a landing just outside Hiccup's house. The landing, despite the ferocity of their descent was easy and standard, the morning ride was done. Hiccup dismounted Toothless as the dragon denoted his eagerness to get the saddle off. He was in a mood for running in the sun, a feat more difficult to perform as winter approached with each passing day. Hiccup was quick to comply. His dragon, grateful for the freedom went off on his way momentarily before stopping, eyeing in curiosity the same spectacle Hiccup viewed as he turned towards the town square.<p>

Much of the village had gathered in a semicircle, many of their dragons behind them. Bishop O'Neill stood on a rock, his odd walking stick in hand, and he seemed to be talking to his fellow Irishmen. The Berkians could only look on in bewilderment as the Bishop spoke in the language even more foreign to Hiccup than Gaelic. Astrid, who had been observing from afar had noticed her husband's return walked up to him and gave him a light punch of the arm.

"Ow! "

"That's for taking off in the morning without saying goodbye."

Hiccup knew what followed, and found it best not to complain as Astrid gave him an affectionate kiss before redirecting her attention to the business at hand.

"They've been at this for half an hour."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. It's mostly been O'Neill and O'Rourke handling that book and talking. The Knights have just been bowing in respect and silence. It's weird."

Hiccup continued to be perplexed by the Irish customs. As long as they did no harm they were welcome, but the way in which they carried themselves Hiccup could tell puzzled the villagers endlessly. He could see in the crowd Eret, son of Eret and Tuffnut both taking a special interest in the ceremony, Ruffnut who stood at the opposite end of the semi circle could only be fascinated by Eret, son of Eret. Fishlegs, who had by this point noticed the arrival of his chief started to hurry up the hill to meet him. All the while O'Neill had taken a loaf of bread he had nearby and began performing some of the strange language over it.

"Good morning my Chief."

"Good Morning Fishlegs, what's going on?"

"Okay, so I've been scouring my books all night, and my information is scattered but useful."

"Okay, what is it?"

"They are Christians. Apparently Ireland is filled with them."

Hiccup and Astrid exchanged glances of interest.

"Apparently, O'Neill's title implies his holiness to the others. The Deacon title of O'Rourke implies some sort subservience to him, and the Knights act as Huscarls of sorts, intent on guarding both of them."

"Okay...any idea what they're doing now?"

"The only mention of Christians I found was in a brief snippet from a trade journal describing Ireland, their customs are as lost on me as they are on you."

Hiccup noticed that O'Neill seemed to be saying more utterances over a cup, whatever that meant.

"And the other language? Anything about that?"

"Oh right! It's a tongue called Laâ€™tine? I think? It's apparently a

language only the Christians use in their ceremonies. It's from very far South, even more than France. "

"Why would the Irish speak a language that is not their own?" Astrid was as curious as Hiccup as she uttered the question.

"I don't really know, but it has something to do with their rituals."

Toothless took his place by Hiccup's side, intrigued by his master's conversation. Hiccup gave him a pat on the head as he looked back to the Irishmen. They were taking turns drinking from the cup O'Neill had been talking over.

"Well, they keep to themselves at least."

Astrid's comment did bring Hiccup back to the situation at hand. He had guests on his island, he knew who they were, but what they were doing was still lost upon him. Hiccup looked behind himself, towards the statue of his father that remained unchanged through these events.

What would he do?

"So, how long are you gonna let them stay?"

Hiccup turned to Astrid, trying to decide for himself what he would do with the Irish visitors. They were peculiar, but harmless.

"We'll let them stay until they desire to leave back for Ireland, provided it is timely."

"Sounds good to me, but how long is that?"

"Until after the ceremony at least, no point to toss out castaways so close to such a day. Might as well let them stay and enjoy the festivities."

Astrid could see the heartache wrought upon her husband's face as he remembered the impending occasion. Just three more days until the ceremony. Valka had been doing her best to get everything in place. It promised to be solemn but well put together occasion. Hiccup noticed that whatever ritual the Irish were performing was over, and the crowd around them had begun to disperse, satisfied in the foreign entertainment and not eager for any more. The knights and O'Rourke followed their leader as he made his way to Hiccup, intent on continuing to build up relations between the two of them.

"Chief Hiccup! It is a pleasure to see you again!"

The Bishop held tightly onto his peculiar walking stick and his smile faded as he saw Toothless by Hiccup's side, who was equally disenchanted with the foreigners before him. The Bishop stopped himself several paces before the chief and his dragon, the knights behind him equally uneasy about the situation. Hiccup could sense their uneasiness but decided not to press the issue of the dragons too heavily; he knew it would take time with these men.

"Bishop O'Neill, it's good to see you this morning. What was that whole business in the town square about?"

The Bishop seemed be joyful to answer the question, the apprehensions he had about mentioning his profession the previous evening seeming to have mostly vanished.

"Ah! That your grace is our Mass."

"Mass of what?" Astrid interjected, as interested as the rest of them. The Bishop understood the confusion and replied.

"The Mass is the way in which we give thanks to God. It is where we recollect the Last Supper of Jesus, and eat his body and drink his blood out of memory for him."

Astrid, Hiccup and Fishlegs couldn't help but look at each other in disgust and disbelief. Hiccup knew it best to speak before something unfortunate was said, but could only utter out the discourteous:

"You areâ€¦cannibals?"

O'Neill was quick to understand the confusion, and was equally quick to try and rectify the conversation.

"No! No, no, no. You see, it is not actual flesh, but bread and wine. We believe that during the Last Supper Christ made the bread and wine at his table with his Apostles, and we perform the same ritual in memory of that night."

"So it's a symbol then?" Fishlegs asked, figuring he was already right.

"Well...no." The soft voice of O'Rourke spoke up, O'Neill motioning with his hand for the young man to continue speaking.

"You see, we believe that when the ritual is performed, the bread and wine becomes the body and blood, it is the living symbol of Christ."

Hiccup was more than confused by the roundabout ways of his guests, and decided not to press the issue much farther. Astrid however was more interested in what the deacon had to say.

"So you can transform wine into blood? You're...magicians then?"

The black robed deacon kept his eyes away from the gaze of the tall, blonde woman who queried him. Astrid took offense to this, but knew she'd never hear the end of it from Hiccup if she made the guests frustrated or uncomfortable.

"No, it is not magic. Magic is the work of the devil. This is instead divine workings, where they are to the human sense but bread and wine, though their inward spirit is that of the body and blood of Christ."

Astrid, as confused as the rest turned to Hiccup, who could only manage to raise his arms in an _I've got nothing_ response. O'Neill saw the confusion of his host, and quickly formulated an idea.

"Chief Hiccup, if I may suggest something. Since O'Rourke speaks Norse as well as I and the lodgings you have supplied for us are slightly cramped, could you perhaps take the deacon under your care? It would help us in better understanding each other, and open up some room for the Knights. If you have the room yourself of course."

Hiccup eyed Astrid, who though showing little care was inside quite interested in the prospect of a houseguest. The deacon was a curious individual, and certainly seemed as though he had some interesting things to say about Irish customs. Hiccup, not wanting to insult his guest with a refutation and also interested in the deacon found it in his best interests to agree.

"Very well, we will take him in until you are ready to return to Ireland."

O'Rourke, who had clearly not been consulted by O'Neill about the matter was surprised at being exchanged like a common slave to his host, but took the blow to his pride gracefully and managed a faint smile towards Hiccup as he walked towards him, submitting to his fate. Toothless kept surprisingly calm in his presence, hardly threatened by the figure as he moved off to the side, glancing at the bishop with a solemn ambivalence.

"Astrid, why don't you show O'Rourke through the house? I'm going to feed Toothless and take a walk through the village; hear the daily problems."

O'Neill was disheartened to have his attention again drawn to the Night Fury, whose demeanor no matter how peaceful was not enough to calm the heart of the Bishop.

"Sure dear, come with meâ€|deacon."

The slim figure followed Astrid towards the house, the book that had been the object of such ceremony a short while ago still clutched firmly to his chest. O'Neill despite the reverence he had given towards the text the night before seemed to have little concern in leaving it in his possession. He turned to the knights, who were worried at the progressive nearing of a Nadder, and instructed them to follow him in Gaelic. It would be back to the warehouse for them, away from the beasts they still held in such contempt. As they passed back through the village towards the wharf, Fishlegs turned to his chief with speculation.

"There's something definitely odd about the Irish."

"It's a crazy island down there." Fishlegs interjected, hoping he would have a chance to put to work his extensive knowledge of the Celtic lands to the south. Hiccup cut him off before he could begin his dissertation.

"Regardless, I think it's best we keep our eyes on them."

"Well I guess there's no better way than to have one living under our roof."

"Yeahâ€|.I guess."

Toothless nudged Hiccup's side with some force, his expression eager after hearing Hiccup mention feeding.

"Yeah okay bud, come on let's go get you some salmon."

Toothless purred as Hiccup bade farewell to Fishlegs and went towards town, Astrid ascending up the hill leading to the house. Both were resolved to learn more about the Irish in both the singular and the plural.

* * *

><p>O'Gara closed the door to the small warehouse behind the five returning Irishmen as the change in air flickered the two torches at opposite sides of the building. A single window at the far side opposite the door let in enough sunlight at the given hour to make the use of the torches almost unnecessary. The five walked in relieved to be away from the multitudes of dragons outside and encouraged as O'Gara locked the door behind them, the clicking sound made by such an action inspiring courage in the shaken knights.<p>

"I don't trust them." John O'Conner was the first to speak, knowing he could be as loud as he desired in his native tongue considering how few on the island seemed to understand them. "There's something not quite right here."

"Tell me, was it the dragons working alongside men like oxen or was it the one legged fishbone of a chief with a pet Night Fury that gave you that impression?" Matthew Hennessey laughed as he leaned against the left wall of the warehouse which he had made his home. His brother Mark joined in for a moment as John O'Conner bore a grimace at the two.

Always the jokers, always united.

O'Neill raised his staff in the center and knew he had to keep the three from their usually bout of trying to kill each other.

"My brothers! Now is not the time for your usualâ€|_pleasantries_. We need to discuss our situation calmly, rationally."

"Because we are dealing with such a rational situation aren't we?" Matthew was two for two in mocking the wordings of others; he felt no qualm about correcting the phrasings of the Bishop despite his stature.

"I don't like it any more than you do Matthew but we cannot make rash decisions now. We are guests here, we have to play by our hosts rules for the moment."

"Except that our host commands an army of dragons. Tell me, what rule tells me I have to bow to a master of such devils?"

"John, please." O'Gara spoke up. "Over the past night and all through this morning we have had no reason to be suspicious of our host or his dragons. They have been well behaved. Our Bishop even touched the Night Fury last night! You cannot stand there and honestly say we are in any kind of threat can you?"

"Do not speak to me with such smugness O'Gara!" John was quick to close the distance between himself and the other Knight. "They are merely biding their time, I just know it! You can't trust these dragons, nor the people who control them!"

O'Gara had no qualms about getting in O'Conner's face, it was an experience he had adjusted to by this point as he and O'Rourke often took the brunt of their compatriots violent outbursts. While O'Gara did tend to fight back to defend his friend and their mutual honor, there were simply times when the deacon would allow himself to suffer the blows from the short tempered Gael, a manner of living that unsettled O'Gara. The knight pushed these unpleasant memories away as he moved to confront his rival, only concerned for the moment of his own honor and safety.

"My friend, what have any of the dragons on this island done to you in the day's time we've been here? What reason, besides your own historical grievances could you have towards hating our conditions?"

The reference to John's past enraged the young knight, who immediately put his hands around O'Gara's throat and tightened them in a rage.

"Do not bring up my past you ungrateful little-!"

The three other men in the room grabbed O'Conner and hoisted him off O'Gara, O'Neill then placing himself between the two as Luke gasped for air on the ground, seemingly unaware that he had suddenly been attacked.

"Enough! Both of you!"

The Bishop's words were enough to momentarily quell the anger in O'Conner's demeanor, but not in his heart.

"Why do still let this one follow us your Holiness? He's almost as bad as O'Rourke, the damned bleeding heart!"

"I will hear none of this right now O'Conner!" The Bishop's gaze fixed upon the rowdy knight with daggers in his eyes. He was sick of John's constant infighting, but found removing him from his service tricky to do. O'Conner meanwhile was composing himself, intent on redirecting his frustration through words now that physical force could not be used.

"All I'm saying is that men like him and O'Rourke are going to get us killed one day. They don't know the dangers of life up here, nor do they understand the ferocity of the beasts we have to deal with!"

"And you, the great John O'Conner do?"

"I've spent my entire life protecting you, slaying the devil's minions that encroach upon you. In many ways, I and been YOUR benefactor ever since"

The stare given to the knight by O'Neill was enough to silence even the most fervent aspirations for debate in his heart. The Bishop would hear nothing of a painful night 10 years ago, one which had

left him a changed man for the worse. O'Gara, by this point recovered enough to stand back up, knew of the severity of the words which O'Conner was thinking, and allowed the tension of the moment to fade away naturally, deciding his own vengeance on John would have to wait. Mark, who had no such misgivings of changing subject, spoke up quickly.

"Well now that we're all friends again can we please focus on what exactly we're going to do? I'd rather not stay around these devils for long, and the dragons are a nuisance as well."

The knight cracked a smile that alleviated at least some of the tension in the room as the Bishop removed his attention from O'Conner and directed it back towards the other three knights.

"Yes, that is indeed an issue. I'll have to speak with Chief Hiccup about getting off this island eventually, butâ€"

"Yeah, what's up with that name?" Matthew couldn't help but interject, receiving a pat on the back from his brother. The Bishop let the crack slide as he continued on.

"â€|But I'll have to broach the situation about getting enough man power to power the oars delicately. It is a lot to ask for from a cast away to a chief, and a heathen at that."

"Well then make him not a heathen." O'Gara spoke up with frankness, figuring the idea warranted at least some discussion considering the type of people in the room. The Bishop looked at him curiously. Luke, surprised that he actually had to extrapolate upon his remarks decided it was indeed a valid idea and continued.

"I'm serious. We have a Bible; we have you, your Holiness, and we have time. These are troubling times for the church, what with the invasions of the Infidel and such. Would we not find favor in the eyes of both man and the Divine to convert these people? Perhaps convince a few of them to join the fight in Iberia?"

O'Conner was back to his boisterous self as he stepped closer to O'Gara once again, who proceeded to take a few steps back, less than hopeful for another bout of fighting.

"You can't possibly be serious? Converting these heathens, these tamers of devils to the way of the Lord? Are you possessed?"

Luke took offense to the accusation and rallied himself.

"Are you really so blind John? This is a golden opportunity before us, are you really going to let yourâ€|personal...beliefs get in the way?"

"Are YOU really so blind as to not see what we are facing? The people out there ride dragons! The beasts which have plagued our beloved country since the days of St. Patrick! They've killed hundreds of us outright, Lord Almighty knows how many more starve to death as a result of their burnings and raids upon the villages!"

"You ignorant fool! Your views are as misguided as your sword swings!"

"How dare you insult my prowess you weakling!"

"Would you care to prove that strength to me?"

"It's already proven!"

The two knights got within two paces of each other before O'Neill stepped between them again, this time not out of direct concern for the two, but in thought. The two knights could see this, and each took a step back, intrigued at what their leader had to say.

"And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."

The four knights in the room were always amazed at the abilities of O'Neill and O'Rourke to recall scripture at a whim. O'Neill seemed to break from the trance of recollection he had put himself in and reared his attention back to the four knights with the smile one usually gets when having begun to plot a lengthy stratagem.

"My Brothers, O'Gara has a point. We have indeed been placed here by God for a reason."

O'Neill made his way to the door and undid the lock letting in the brilliant light of midday as two Nadder's flew overhead, their screams causing the four knights to duck their heads before recalling the safety of their enclosure.

"My brothers, we shall indeed bring the Word here, to this lowly isle. And it is here we shall begin our own crusade. The devil's creatures and their masters will submit to the word of God, by the book or by the sword."

O'Neill gazed off into the distance, his mind lost again in fantasy and the ecstasy of his new conviction. Matthew, Mark, and John all raised their hands in joy, knowing that their time was to be put to good use.

Luke did the same, his cheer only less forceful. Conversion did sound like a noble calling and if it was his argument that led to such a conclusion he could support such an undertaking whole heartedly. Still, there was something in O'Neill's smile that troubled the back of the knight's mind, some faint but lurking malevolent thought that trembled at the back of the bishop's declaration. Whatever it was, O'Gara pushed it to the back of his mind as his eyes readjusted the burst of radiant sunlight filling the room as a light breeze of sea air rushed in. He knew O'Rourke would likely be excited by this news, and the knight could only start to wonder what the deacon was going through in the house of the Night Fury rider.

3. Legacies and Ambitions

****Bitter Memories...and Wishful Thinking.****

* * *

><p>As Hiccup closed the door behind himself and Toothless, he fell back against it in exhaustion. Six hours. Six hours of the same

questions, the same fears, the same problems. What do they want? What are they doing? Do they have anything to trade?<p>

"Gods!"

Hiccup kicked his prosthetic forward in frustration. Astrid and Valka, both preparing an extra large dinner for the three of them and their guest, equally desired to comfort the man in their lives. Valka conceded and allowed Astrid to speak first.

"Long day?"

Astrid hoped her smile would work its usual charm on her husband, and she was right. But the smile brought to Hiccup's face began to dissipate as rapidly as it appeared as he noticed the presence of Deacon O'Rourke in the room. He hadn't noticed him at first, he sat quietly to the side of the room, his black robes disguising him in the fire lit darkness of a house at night. He read his book, which seemed to never leave his person. He kept his head down, his finger carefully going over the pages as he seemed to mutter something to himself, Hiccup was unsure whether it was Gaelic or Latin. Despite his long day of uncomfortable conversations, he mustered his diplomatic fortitude and addressed his guest.

"Well, enjoying your stay Deacon?"

O'Rourke was slow to acknowledge Hiccup, who had seemed to break him out of a trance. His finger lifted off the book and his head raised. He moved his stringy black hair off his face as he gave a nod of acknowledgment to the Chief and began to speak softly, choosing his words carefully either for the sake of diplomacy, or out of fear.

"Yes Chief, I thank you for taking me in."

Hiccup was surprised by this Irishman's demeanor. Whereas O'Neill had great confidence in speaking with Hiccup, and the knights were equally if not as loud as the Bishop, O'Rourke seemed to suffer from chronic shyness. Given the circumstances Hiccup could understand. The chief took a seat at the table where Valka and Astrid had finished presenting the meal. Smoked salmon and pickled squash, back to the regular routine it was then.

"Please Deacon, come and eat."

Valka welcomed the thin man over, who closed his book and brought it with him to the table. Hiccup couldn't understand the man's fascination with the text, and he figured that it may be a good point of conversation.

"Well then dig in, we didn't slave all day for nothing."

Hiccup hated when Astrid said that, it made him feel like an overbearing master. But he knew it was in good fun, and took a large piece of fish from the plate in front of him. At the same moment, the deacon reached beneath his robes and pulled out the talisman Hiccup and seen the night before, held it out in front of himself and spoke the foreign Latin tongue that fascinated Hiccup to no end. When O'Rourke had finished his recitation, Hiccup turned to him and decided to start learning more about these Christians.

"What is that you do?"

O'Rourke was visibly distraught over explaining himself, Astrid was quick to pick up on his nervous demeanor, and she wasn't sure why despite her and Valka's hospitality the deacon was so reluctant to engage them, herself especially.

"It-It's a cross. We carry them as a sign of our faith. I use it to bless each meal before eating."

"Why?" Astrid decided she would enter the conversation, as interested as Hiccup in the ways of this quiet Irishman.

"How do you mean?" O'Rourke wanted to understand the question fully, not wanting to say anything to upset his host, much less his wife.

"Why is that the symbol? And what do you say?"

O'Rourke took a moment to gather his thoughts. He pulled the cross back out and held it up gently to the three Vikings at the table

"The language is Latin. It was the language originally spoken by the Romans, now it is only spoken by clergymen like myself and the Bishop, as well as much of the nobility in the South.

"Wait, why do you speak that language then? Are you not Irish?"

"I am, but this is the language spoken by the Romans, in whose Empire we established our faith. After many years of persecution by the Romans, followers of Christ were allowed to practice freely, and so we who work in the churches still speak the language out of tradition."

"Yet you speak the language of the people who persecuted you?" Astrid was beginning to find the ways of the Irish as perplexing as Hiccup, but was nonetheless fascinated. O'Rourke knew things were about to get confusing as he responded.

"Wellâ€¦yes. But a few hundred years after they had killed Jesus, a good man named Constantine finally gave us protection in the empire, and from there in Rome our church has grown and spread far and wide, from Sahara to Scotland."

Hiccup started to become interested in O'Rourke again, who obviously held a strong knowledge of geography. Ever hoping to expand his knowledge and pick up hints as to the location of other Night Furies, Hiccup retook control of the conversation.

"This Rome, where is it?"

"Very far South of here, Southeast of the Southern borders of France."

"Interesting. Now you say thisâ€¦Constantineâ€¦ gave your people protection, what was the cause of this?"

O'Rourke steadied himself to begin a history lesson with his host,

knowing to choose his words carefully to ease the confusion that was bound to occur.

"Well, after the death of Christ, for three hundred years Christians were persecuted by the Romansâ€|"

"Three hundred years?!" Astrid was shaken by the number, surprised to hear of the resolve of these strange Christ followers.

"Yes...they were dark times for us, and many a martyr was made by Roman steel."

O'Rourke trailed off a moment, Valka could see in him a deep pain of regret that even centuries was apparently not able to heal.

"But one day, Constantine was intent on becoming Emperor. He had marched his army to the gates of the city, but was blocked at a bridge by an opposing army. Then, the Lord sent an image in the sky in the name of our Savior, and Constantine made his soldiers paint the symbol on their shields. Constantine carried the day, and became to the first Christian Emperor. Over the centuries then the church has grown stronger, and has spread far and wide. Though we do have our enemies stillâ€|"

O'Rourke again trailed off as he took a drink.

"What kinds of enemies?" Hiccup was genuinely interested. The man's education could certainly hold the chief's attention, at least as long as he spoke. O'Rourke instead decided to change the subject, knowing that attempting to explain the wars with the Infidel would only darken the mood in the room.

"It is best left for another time. Anyways, you asked about this."

O'Rourke motioned his attention to the cross still held out in front of him. It glistened faintly in the firelight of the house, its edges evidently worn down from being worn for a great deal of time.

"This is the cross. That is what the Romans used to kill Jesus Christ. We wear it in memory of his sacrifice"

"Sacrifice for what?" Astrid was even more interested in the inner workings of the faith than Hiccup, who relented control of the conversation back to his wife as he got back to his dinner.

"His sacrifice was so that we may find redemption in the eyes of God, to cleanse humanity of its sins. He died so that we may live."

Hiccup looked towards his mother, who was as perplexed as he. They both slowed down their eating and kept an eye on their guest, curious as to what he was saying. Astrid continued her inquisition.

"So, he let himself dieâ€|to protect people?"

O'Rourke knew it was better to leave the mysteries of the faith to another time, and that explaining the faith would take more than a meal to do.

"In a way, but it is a story better saved for later."

Hiccup, though frustrated by how hard it was to get information out of the Irishman, was appreciative they could move on with the meal in peace, for a moment. Toothless, not content on being ignored had come to the side of Hiccup, trying to get his hands on some salmon.

"Hey! You had your dinner, now leave me to mine!"

Hiccup used his right hand to wrestle Toothless' snout, a game that had become common at the dinner table. While Valka and Astrid admired the playfulness of the two, O'Rourke was reminded of his reality that he was sleeping under the roof of a man who controlled a Night Fury, the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Hiccup noticed the withdrawal of color from the deacon's face and decided it was best to try and get his guest comfortable with Toothless sooner than later.

"It's okay deacon, he won't hurt you."

Toothless made his way over to the guest, hoping to manage some food out of the slim figure. O'Rourke was cautious, but remained calm in his demeanor, hoping to not startle the beast. Toothless tried to grab some salmon off the deacon's plate, who moved it away just before Toothless' tongue could coat the entire meal in his fish scented saliva.

"Just give him a little something and he'll leave you alone."

Hiccup didn't like feeding Toothless from the table, but knew it was worth a momentary lapse in discipline to break down the walls of prejudice the Irish held towards dragons. The deacon, knowing he had been put into a bad position took a large piece of fish from his plate and slowly brought it near the dragon's mouth. Toothless opened his maw to reveal his gums and gums alone to the deacon.

"Uh, toothless." Daniel looked up to the chief, curious of the name and the nature of the dragon. "I could have sworn he hadâ€"

The dragon's teeth extended and in a flash he had taken the filet from the deacon's hands and swallowed it. While Toothless was appreciative of the gift, the deacon held his hands back to his chest in fright, only stammering out.

"T-T-T Teethâ€|."

The three Vikings couldn't help but fall into a fit of hysterical laughter, the women knowing full well Hiccup's anecdote about the night he had established trust with Toothless. The deacon was unsure what to make of the laughter of his hosts, and decided to hesitantly join in, keeping one eye on the smiling Night Fury besides him. Hiccup took a drink of his mead and got his laughter under control, redirecting his gaze at the bewildered guest.

"Now would be the point where you could touch him...if you want to."

Hiccup managed a final snicker as the deacon looked at Toothless who sat by his side hoping for more salmon. With his right hand, O'Rourke clutched the cross beneath his cloak. With his left hand, he slowly

made a palm and extended it towards the creature, who was filled with joy to smell fish on the hand, but disappointed to see that it held nothing. Still he extended his neck and made contact with the Irishmen. Unlike his efforts with O'Neill the previous evening, Hiccup was relieved to see a smile develop upon the deacon's face, the grip upon his cross loosening.

"Ahh, he likes ya."

Valka couldn't help but break the silence of the moment and regain conversational momentum.

"Not exactly the unholy offspring of lightning and death is he?"

Hiccup knew that he had broken through to the young Irishman, who could only manage to stare into the emerald green eyes that reminded him of home. Though there was still visible fear writ upon the deacon's face, the smile that often comes with laying hands on such a legendary creature appeared as it usually did.

"No, not at all."

"I hope you can convince your Bishop of that. It's been a while since I've seen a person so unwilling to accept the companionship of dragons."

Valka could see on Hiccup's face his recollections of Stoick. Despite the fact that he had nearly killed both Hiccup and Toothless when he learned of their friendship, and disowned his only son over it, even Stoick in the end had come to accept dragons. Stoick the vast, legendary dragon killer had in time come to love and respect dragons. If Hiccup had found a man in O'Neill even more stubborn than his father, he was in trouble.

"I know you mean well by your friendship with theseâ€¦beasts. But understand that in Ireland we do not have the luxury of such companionship."

"We thought we didn't either, but then we found their nest, their queen. It's what controls them. They bring back food to their queen to feed it so they are not in turn eaten themselves. Kill the queen, and dragons are just like any other animal, capable of being tamed and made into great friends. Right bud?"

Toothless was quick to acknowledge the sentiment of his friend and leaped over to his side, calmly resting his head on the table as Hiccup patted his head. While O'Rourke was impressed with the sight, he grew curious of his host's extensive knowledge of dragons.

"How do you know all of this?"

"Because I've fought the one we have around here. Toothless and I did. We killed it, together. And I have this to prove it."

Hiccup heaved his prosthetic onto the table, letting it hit the wood with a loud clunk as O'Rourke could only look on in wonder.

"Oh...O'Neill had been wondering about that last night.."

The two exchanged glances and laughed. Hiccup was appreciative that his guest was growing more comfortable around him, and Toothless.

"Hiccup how many times do I have to tell you feet off the furniture?"

Valka managed a grin at her son who complied, knowing his desired effect had occurred. O'Rourke instead leaned in closer to Hiccup, at last comfortable talking to the chief, if only the chief.

"But even if we could find this demon amongâ€¦"

Hiccup eyed the deacon to watch his words, especially now that Hiccup had demonstrated to him the kindness of dragons.

"â€¦it would do little to alleviate our woes. We Irish can be stubborn at times, and I doubt that many would be willing to be at leisure with those that have plagued them since Roman days. Even then convincing both the people and the churches that they are not the spawn of the devil would be a monumental task in and of itself."

"Like O'Neill?"

Astrid's entrance into the conversation surprised Hiccup, who allowed his wife the reigns for now as he got back to his fish.

"Well, yes."

"Why is he so reluctant to see dragons differently?"

O'Rourke was visibly pained as he began to recall his memory. It showed on his face to such an extent that Astrid almost wanted to tell him not to speak if he was uncomfortable, but O'Rourke began speaking before she could do so.

"I was just a boy at the time. Many of us were. I was ten years old at the time living at the monastery outside Cork justâ€¦"

"What's a monastery?"

"It is a place where people go to be alone with God and other like minded people. I was dropped at one by my parents at the age of eight, and it was two years after that that then Priest O'Neill was visiting us."

"Okay, continue."

"Well thenâ€¦it was nearing the end of Autumn when O'Neill arrived. He would be staying with us a few days to help us in bringing in our harvest and surveying how the monastery was doing. It had been a beautiful day, the cool winds off the bogs were strong and kept us in good spirits. It was a long day of harvesting, but a good one. My back ached fiercely by the end given my youth, but it is never said that the life of a monk is easy. We were gathered together in our dining hall, prayers had been said, and we were beginning our dinner. Clouds were rolling in and we had secured everything ahead of the storm."

O'Rourke stopped and took a long sip of his mead, Hiccup noticing how his hand seemed to tremble ever so slightly as he did so. The deacon put the mug down in a near empty state, took a breath and continued speaking.

"Then it came. We had experienced raids before of varying intensity, but nothing like this before or since. It came so fast, so suddenly, and in such ferocity."

Hiccup was hesitant to ask, but knew it necessary to do so.

"Dragons?" O'Rourke met the chief's gaze and nodded his head.

"More than I could count. We immediately had to stop our dinner and take cover, or at least we younger ones did. The older monks had accepted they had to break their vows of nonviolence every now and then when it came to dealing with the de- dragons. Myself and three other boys were rushed under our tables while some of the monks grabbed their swords and went outside. O'Neill stayed inside with us."

"Too old to fight?"

"No, he wanted to protect us in case one of the beasts could make it past our stone walls. He vowed to protect us with his life."

Hiccup and Valka exchanged a glance of memories and curiosity. Astrid could only manage to say "coward" under her breath, though O'Rourke had busied himself too much in consuming the last of his mead to notice.

"Windows were regularly illuminating with the fire from outside. We could hear the older monks outside screaming, their calls mixed in with the dragons roars. I was told to keep my head down, but the rest of us boys couldn't help but try and look through the high windows to see _something_. Anything. We knew when we grew up we would probably have to take the same role as our brothers outside, but we were too young to know what that truly entailed."

Hiccup couldn't help but be reminded of his younger self, the fear and curiosity that pervaded him whenever there was a raid, up through the raid that brought down Toothless and their first meeting on the opposite sides of a bolas trap. O'Rourke had taken another moment to compose himself, making it obvious to his hosts the next part would be the most uncomfortable.

"Then _it_ startedâ€¦."

The deacon trailed off again, Hiccup couldn't tell if this was genuine fear, or just dramatic effect.

"What started?"

"The shriek. That...horrible shriek! It started off faint, barely noticeable amidst the din of chaos outside. Then it got louder. And louder. Every passing moment it got louder, until it was unbearable for us on the inside. I can only imagine what it was like on the outside. Then it hit. All I could hear before wasâ€¦"

The deacon eyed Toothless, who sat innocently at Hiccup's side with hardly any concern for the conversation at hand. Hiccup, Astrid and Valka all noticed the stare, their minds piecing together the connection O'Rourke was trying so desperately to hide.

"Then it hit. It hit and then there was quiet a moment. The roar of battle returned again, softer this time. I could hear less and less of the brothers scream. And the roars of the dragons faded as well. Then it came back again. There was the shriek, just like before, then another brilliant flash outside, and quiet. And this time I _mean_ quiet. There was nothing left. No man, no dragon dared to make a sound."

The room was quiet with the exception of Valka clearing dishes. Astrid and Hiccup kept a close eye on O'Rourke as his head hung low over his body.

"We boys weren't allowed outside till morning, O'Neill wouldn't allow it. When we finally didâ€¦"

O'Rourke paused again. Hiccup gave Toothless a pat on the head, despite the connections he was making he refused to believe Toothless could possibly be connected to such an event. There had to be other Night Furies down South.

Should remember to take a trip to Ireland one of these days...

"When we finally did...the smell. The smell was everywhere. Everything was burnedâ€¦_everything._ The crops, the animals, the buildingsâ€¦.and then...then the brothers."

O'Rourke ended the last word with a raise in pitch as he began to cry. Valka put down a plate and went to comfort the guest. Hiccup was regretting having ever asked about O'Neill's past, not knowing it would bring up this painful memory of O'Rourke's.

"Everyone of them! Not a one was spared!"

The deacon lost himself to his emotions for the moment, Valka seeking some kind of guidance from Hiccup, who was unsure whether to push forward or allow the guest to wallow in tragedy for the rest of the evening. He did not have to make up his mind before O'Rourke gathered himself for a moment and looked at Hiccup, Toothless keeping by his side amidst the tenseness of the situation.

"O'Neill knew EVERYONE of them. Everyone! We buried them all that day, all forty six of them in the fields we had just harvested the day before. They were useless now. As useless as the smoldering bodies they took with them."

There was a pause as O'Rourke returned to crying, the awkward presence of the miserable soul led to a general quiet in the room as Valka tried to keep the guest under control, stroking his black hair slowly, hoping to stabilize his breathing.

"We laid them to rest, prayed for their souls...and then we left. Just O'Neill and the rest of us children. He took us in under his care in Cork and we left the monastery in God's hands. Ever since

that nightâ€|it's been...painful."

O'Rourke eyed Hiccup again.

"Nobody should have to see what we saw. We-w-we were boys for God's sakes!"

O'Rourke finally lost all control and excused himself from the table, heading out the back door and into the night with tears upon his face. The tension broken, Astrid finally recalled her desire to speak.

"Wellâ€|that was interesting."

"Aye, poor man shouldn't have had to go through that at his age."

Valka and Astrid were in agreement on that at least, and Hiccup was soon to join them.

"No wonder O'Neill didn't take to Toothless."

"I wouldn't either if I had to go through that. Yet O'Rourke was fine with it. Granted his memories may say differently but at least he's comfortable around Toothless, despiteâ€|well, you know."

Hiccup knew Astrid was careful to broach the subject, but he knew her sentiments. Despite as far as they'd come, as much as they had lived and nearly died by each other, Hiccup had to remember that Toothless was at the end of the day a dragon. A very intelligent dragon yes, but still a dragon. He was dragon that had caused Berk much heartache in the past and had nearly killed Hiccup upon their first meeting. Hiccup turned to his friend, who was still as eager as ever for scraps.

"Well bud, looks like you've got some bad cousins down South."

* * *

><p>For Hiccup, there was something to be said about monotony. For while it may be just that the monotonous rhythm of work, of cycling through book after book and complaint after complaint worked one into a vocational trance that when in full swing could be very enjoyable, until when it ended, and Hiccup realized that he had spent an hour reading the wrong book. The interruption that broke the cycle was a pounding on his door which was shortly answered by Valka who had only recently settled back in after her late morning flight.<p>

"Hiccup, Snotlout here to see you."

"One moment."

Whenever Snotlout showed up it was never good news. Not that Snotlout always brought bad news, but his presence never made Hiccup feel comfortable even to this day. He could see beyond his cousin's shroud of loyalty into the envy he carried deep within his heart. Envy of Hiccup for everything. Toothless, Astrid, the chiefdom, his sword, everything. But Hiccup had learned over the past year that what Snotlout showed in desire he failed to make up for in willpower, and the chief could rest assured that he need not face a coup anytime

soon.

As usual, his cousin's face was one of consternation and anger, but more pronounced than usual. Hiccup knew something had to be up to warrant a change in his facial expression.

"Snotlout, good day. What's up?"

The man's face continued its frustrated appearance as he grabbed Hiccup's arm tightly and pulled him outside. Hiccup knew it was not a sign of disrespect, simply Snotlout's aggressive manner of service.

"This."

He gestured with his hand to the town center, where O'Neill again stood upon the rock that overlooked it. This time however, O'Rourke was not by his side, and the knights instead stood in front of him in a position as close to guarding as one could be without weapons. The Bishop seemed to be talking loudly, his words mumbled to Hiccup in the winds of the day. His walking stick-cross in his right hand and a pointing figure in the other, the Bishop seemed to address the gathered Berkians around him, at least half the village was assembled and listening to the Bishop, though their faces were more of bewilderment and anger than of fascination in the words of the prominent guest. Hiccup looked to behind the house where Toothless was playing tag with Cloudjumper. He would leave them to their amusement for now, figuring if he approached O'Neill without Toothless at his back he might better interact with the figure.

"Well, any ideas what they're up to?"

"Just looks like the same stuff they were up to yesterday, only without all the formalities."

"Well then let's go have a look shall we?"

Please not now, please not now. Couldn't one day pass on Berk without trouble? Was that too much to ask?

Had Odin intended to curse Hiccup by sending him those who did not worship him?

Please don't be up to anything crazy O'Neill, for the love of your God don't be.

"And Jesus answered that "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God!" "

"But you'll starve if you don't eat!"

A heckle came up from the crowd as Hiccup approached, waiting for the raucous brought about by the joke to recede before beginning his address.

"Bishop O'Neill!"

The man turned, the fervor his speech broken enough to allow him to change subjects. He smiled upon seeing his host, especially without a

Night fury at his side.

"Ah! Chief Hiccup, it is a pleasure to see you today."

Hiccup viewed the crowd, many of whom were looking to him for guidance in the matter. Whatever O'Neill was saying was disturbing them to some extent, Hiccup had to find out what.

"Bishop, what is the meaning of this?"

"My chief, given that I and my companions are to be here for the next few days, we decided to take it upon ourselves to bring the word of our faith to your people. They deserve to hear the story of our Savior."

Snotlout could only manage to roll his eyes at the guest. Hiccup decided to be more diplomatic in his approach.

"And why is that Bishop?"

"For you see my good host, it is through the Word of God and His Son that one may enter heaven. We seek to redeem the souls of your people so that they may know joy in the next life."

"And why would they not find joy there should they die now? Are you implying our warriors do not go to Valhalla?"

The crowd roared in support of the chief, who they could see and hoped to win the argument at hand to silence the annoying Celtic guests.

"Reward in the next life is not a matter of dying in battle Chief, it is how one lives in their day to day lives that determines their connection with God."

"And which God is this?" Hiccup hoped that O'Neill would state the conclusion he himself had reached a while ago, and it's shock would upset the villagers enough to warrant a withdraw from the Irish. O'Neill saw the trap being set for him and took a moment to prepare a proper response.

"The God, for there is only one. He is the master of all things, all men and things of nature bow down to him in his majesty."

Another roar came up from the crowd in frustration. The knights gathered in around the Bishop closer, sensing the faintest hint of violence in the air. Hiccup could see he had an advantage and pressed it.

"And so you say that we are all subjects to this God? That I, you, all of Berk are but servants to this god's whim?"

The crowd roared again in support of their chief, affirming their desire to be under nobody's control but his. Before O'Neill brought up his finger to gesture a response, he was cut off by the gravely and experienced voice of one of the knights.

"Do you not already serve a multitude of gods?"

Luke O'Gara broke into the conversation, one eye on Hiccup and

another on the crowd that grew frustrated at the ongoing debate these foreigners were having with their chief.

"What was that?"

"Do you not pray to Thor for good weather? Do you not praise Odin for the good fortune you have? Do you not pray to Freya for a good harvest and amiable relations? What difference is there between praying to the many and praying to the One?"

The crowd grew quiet at the words of the Norse speaking knight. O'Neill seemed to either reprimand or praise his friend in Gaelic before turning back to Hiccup for a response, who found himself momentarily stunned in his being outmaneuvered in debate.

"Wellâ€¦.. Well we choose to serve our gods. Our gods have watched over us for centuries, why should we submit to your God when ours have done nothing but provide for us all this time?"

Hiccup knew his response wasn't good, but O'Gara had blindsided him. The chief's confidence ebbed under the sudden shock of being outwitted. O'Neill could see he now had a perfect opportunity to wrap up the conversation with some honor, and moved in for the strike.

"And so chief Hiccup, as you choose to serve your gods, we merely implore upon you to allow us to serve ours by bringing his Word to the people of Berk. We ask only that you give people the opportunity to hear the Word, and make such a decision for themselves. May God strike me down if this is not His desire."

The four knights looked hesitantly towards the sky for the moment, fearful of some kind of divine retribution. Hiccup had found himself put into a delicate position. He couldn't simply kick out or lock up his guests. Not now, and certainly not for this. How would that reflect on him? He looked out at the crowd, who in turn looked to him for guidance. He knew them all, even the youngest had known him for at least 10 years. He merely raised his hand and gestured it to the Irishmen. He took a deep breath to gather the courage to say the words.

"The Irishmen may speak of what they pleaseâ€¦."

O'Neill smiled at the concession of the chief, but found it faded with the second half of the sentence.

"â€¦But the people of Berk are not required to listen."

The crowd let loose a final cheer before beginning to disband, having seen their chief win in debate was enough a show for the day. O'Gara, being the only other Irishman to understand looked with concern to the Bishop, who could only finish his conversation with the Chief with:

"Thank you Chief, We shall take your blessing to heart."

In Gaelic, the Bishop turned to O'Gara to address his worried pupil.

"Well played brother. Well played indeed."

"Thank you Father, I learned from the best."

"And just who would that be?" The Bishop was confident in his tone and expected a pleasant answer from the knight.

"A good man." Was all O'Gara could manage, his voice fading off as he did so. The Bishop was satisfied enough with the answer despite its ambiguity and looked back towards the chief.

"I apologize my chief, but resorting to our native tongue is sometimes inescapable."

Despite not caring for the Gaelic interlude between the two Irishmen, Hiccup could only nod at his guest and turned back to his house, confident in his oral victory. Snotlout followed beside him, and whispered softly.

"I don't trust them Hiccup."

"Since when have you trusted anyone?"

Snotlout grabbed his chief by the shoulder. Hiccup again remembered not to take offense to the hostile nature of his cousin.

"I'm serious Hiccup! These Christians are up to no good. They speak blasphemy, and some of the villagers are worried."

Hiccup was more than aware of the complaints of the villagers, but allowed Snotlout to continue making his point, whatever it was.

"I just don't want to see the village torn apart by this. Not now, not so close toâ€¦you know."

The two looked up to the statue of Stoick, uncle to one and father to another. Two more days. Two more days and it would be over, then Hiccup could begin to take a harder line with the Irish. But to be harsh now, in the presence of his father so close to such an important date would be a crime neither Hiccup nor the spirit of his father that he held dear to him could ever forgive.

"I know Snotlout."

"So what are gonna do about it then?"

Hiccup took a moment to gather his thoughts, keeping the memory of his father close to him.

"Whatever's right."

As Hiccup and Snotlout walked away, O'Neill was distraught to see the crowds that assembled to hear his words out of curiosity were dissipating rapidly after the blow delivered to the Irish by their host. Free will had always been the trickiest part of human behavior to get around, or at least the Bishop thought so. And where was O'Rourke? Had the Night Fury eaten him? He had the only Bible! O'Neill needed to get his hands back on it and soon if his proselytizing was to work.

"Well Father you gave it your best shot, now can we go about using

force?" Matthew's tone was mostly comical, but his frustration was evident to the Bishop.

"Have some restraint my child, let us not be too hasty to commit sins now."

"Because we certainly aren't in the presence of sinners at the moment..."

"Enough of your sarcasm. We simply need to find a different way to show these people the truth."

"And how exactly do we intend toâ€"

"Excuse me?"

Both O'Neill and Matthew turned to find what seemed to be the only man left in the area addressing them. O'Neill remembered the face from his first contact with the village and decided contact with him could be infinitely more redeeming than whatever banter Matthew would present.

"Uh yes. Umâ€|.don't tell meâ€|Eret, right?"

"â€|Son of Eret, and yes I am."

O'Neill was intrigued by the man. His muscular stature and tattoos across his arms indeed had him marked as much a Viking as the rest around him. But perhaps within the thick skull he wore there was at least a mind with enough sense to listen.

"Anywaysâ€|Iâ€|umâ€|.I was wondering if I could ask you gentlemen a favor."

While the man's demeanor began to concern O'Neill, the bishop pressed on in the hopes of finding a convert.

"Yes, what exactly?"

"Yes, wellâ€|.you see there's this girlâ€|Ruffnut Thornston."

" OhAnseo thÃ©ann muid" O'Gara muttered, the Gaelic being lost on Eret, son of Eret but managing a smile on O'Neill's face.

"And?"

"She's been pestering me for over a year now. Every day she fawns over me like a piece of meat, and I don't like it. I've tried everything to get rid of her, but she always shows up for more. I don't know what to do."

O'Neill looked back at O'Gara, who could only manage an "I've got nothing" response with his arms.

"Andâ€|.what do you want us to do about it?"

"Well, being as it all means on this island I've tried have failed, I was wondering if any of you Irishmen could help me be rid of her. Do would any of you know of any possible solutions to such a

problem?"

A candle of an idea quickly spread into a blazing scheme inside the mind of Bishop O'Neill.

"I'll tell you what lad; We would be glad to take the girl off your hands. I'm sure whoever she is cannot resist the alluring charms of a good Irish knight. We'll take care of your problem."

Eret, son of Eret's face erupted into a smile and he moved to embrace the Bishop. Though the latter was nearly choked by the muscular hug, the knights could only help but laugh. Eret, son of Eret eventually let go, smiled at the Bishop, and began to turn away, but was stopped by the Bishop in a voice relieved to receive air again.

"On one condition."

Eret, son of Eret slowly turned back to the Irishman, cautious as to what would follow.

"What?"

O'Neill knew he had to phrase his caveat carefully, and responded:

"If we manage to get this girl to leave you alone, you promise to be baptized in the name of our faith."

Eret, son of Eret took in the request with some thought. He was interested at least slightly in the ways of the Irish, his more nomadic upbringing making him less close minded than the Vikings who had taken him in as one of their own since last year.

"What does this mean, to be baptized?"

"It means that you will renounce your ways and follow our faith, learning it, living by it, and helping us to spread it here on Berk."

Eret, son of Eret continued to consider the proposal. He had never really been a person who put much stock in the gods, as they had never really been there for him. Even if he did officially adopt the faith, the Irish would be gone in a short while; at least that was what he had heard from Valka in the market. He could just renounce it after the Irish left, and then be in favor with the village again. Plus he'd be rid of the Thornston girl, and that would be enough for him. Why not?

"Sure, but only if you can keep the girl away from me for the next few days, then I'll be convinced."

O'Neill was relieved to see his plan coming into fruition, and took the Viking's hand.

"It's a deal, and may it be one that God looks favorably upon."

Eret, son of Eret took the Bishop's hand and gripped it tightly, O'Neill showing some visible distress at the sudden lack of circulation in his extremity.

"Good then, it's a deal."

Eret, son of Eret now left the Irishmen for good. The Bishop, a rare smile of elation upon his face turned back to his knights, hoping to explain to the non-Norse speakers the divinely mandated occurrence. O'Gara, having understood the conversation could only look at his leader with disappointment for his roundabout ways.

"If you think I'm marrying a Viking girl you had better plan to personally freeze Hell over."

The Bishop could only pat the knight on his shoulder as he looked to the departing Eret, son of Eret.

"All in good time my child, all in good time."

* * *

><p>Quiet. For the first time today everything was quiet for Hiccup. The table was cleared, Valka out for her evening flight The kitchen was still. Night and the solitude that it brought were finally here. Despite the exhaustion he felt and his eagerness Hiccup felt to be in bed with Astrid, he just wanted to enjoy waking quiet before the cycle began again tomorrow. He stared into his cup of mead, a second one too many as far as he was concerned, as was Astrid. But given the impending occasion and the headache brought about by a village afraid of Irishmen, Hiccup felt he deserved it. O'Rourke, who had been out most of the day doing who knows what had returned for dinner and- as always- sat at his makeshift bed in the far corner of the house reading his book by candlelight.<p>

_ Did he ever part with that book? Why did he even try and save it from the wreck?_

It was ridiculous enough the knights had held onto their heavy swords amidst being thrown about the ocean, but a book?

How old was this mead?

It tasted as if it hadn't aged properly, then again it was mead.

_Eh, why not? _

With a final gulp Hiccup swallowed the drink and forced himself to not have another. Despite his inebriation, he found it as good a time as any to question his guest again. Perhaps the more amiable demeanor of the Deacon would offset the anger Hiccup felt at being bested in debate by a foreign warrior. He got up from the table slowly, his head spinning mildly but fast enough to make him second guess his actions. O'Rourke did not seem to notice, having once again put himself into a trance of reading.

"Deacon!" Hiccup yelled louder than he had intended as he tripped over a sack of grain with his prosthetic. The sudden jolt snapped the Irishman out of his trance as he looked to see if his host was alright which, asides from his hand having to slam into a support beam to control himself, he was.

"Umâ€¦..yes Chief Hiccup?"

Hiccup half sat and half fell onto a small stool he had pulled under himself and brought himself down with a thud, the young Irishman slightly worried at the out of character demeanor of his so far mild mannered host. Hiccup leaned forward, the smell of distilled honey brushing the deacon's nose with the subtly of a feather and the weight of brick.

"Wha're you reading'"

"Um...my Bible."

"Yeahâ€¦.but what are you reading?"

"Umâ€¦."

Astrid broke the deacon's train of nonexistent thought as she opened the door upstairs. The earlier thud against the support beam having been enough to rattle her out of bed to check on her absent and inebriated husband.

"Hiccup? Come up to bed already."

"Nah! Hold onâ€¦.hold on. Deacon here's about toâ€¦toâ€¦.read!"

Astrid could tell her husband was again intoxicated beyond his means, and came downstairs to drag him personally up to bed. Hiccup was very much unlike his father, that was established. His inability to handle a great deal of alcohol was one of those many differences.

"Hold Astridâ€¦Hold on Astridâ€¦let deacon read! He got the...got...special Latin...book...thing...book"

Astrid gave a look of confidence to the deacon, assuring him the situation was comfortable. O'Rourke looked back to his book where his finger was kept precisely where it had been prior to interruption.

"Well, I suppose I could translate it into Norse, can't be too difficult can it?"

"Yeah more of that Latinâ€¦..Romanâ€¦..Rome words you speak."

Astrid made her way to O'Rourke's right side and sat on his bed next to him, hoping to strengthen the nervous Irishman's resolve in the face of a drunken Chief. The deacon instead seemed to squirm in his seat, troubled by the woman's presence next to him. He hardly even looked in her direction, instead seeming to strain his eyes for no discernible reason upon the bible. Astrid continued to take offense to the shyness of her mutual guest. It was one thing to be worried when they all first met at the beach, but they had gotten to know each other enough since then. _Perhaps the Irish were fearful of their own women?_ It was the best Astrid could come up with in her fatigued state as O'Rourke began to read.

"Well thenâ€¦. "It is good to give thanks to the Lord to sing praise to your name, Most High, To proclaim-"

"Wait! Wait â€¦wait. No. Start from the beginning. You can't just, you knowâ€¦start halfway through. How's start?"

Hiccup's interruption of the scripture was a faint shock to O'Rourke, who though wanting to continue the passage decided in his best interest to turn the heavy book to its front, much to the excitement of Hiccup, who relished in the idea of hearing the beginnings of this fabled book. The deacon took a deep breath and began to read.

"In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth. And the Earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said "Let there be light." And there was light."

The deacon looked up to find Hiccup staring at him in curiosity. Astrid, though he did not turn to face her, was equally interested in these words. The deacon continued.

"And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from darkness. And God called the light day and the darkness he called night, and the evening and the morning were the first day."

"Waitâ€¦wait. Soâ€¦this book keeps track of all the days since time began? So like, what happens when youâ€¦like...run out of pages?"

"This is merely the story of creation chief Hiccup, of how in six days God created the world in all of his divine wisdom."

"Six days?" Astrid whispered, trying not to spook the Irishman by her side or get too much of Hiccup's attention.

"Yes. On the second he divided the waters from the heavens, on the third he made the dry land and the plants that grow upon it, on the fourth he made the stars in heaven and the sun and the moon, on the fifth he made the creatures that roam in the sea, and on the sixth all those creatures that walk upon the land. And then-"

"People?"

"I'm sorry?"

"People, did he make people? Like Ask andâ€¦Embla?" Hiccup eyed Astrid, his usually gentleman like subtleties and hints at romance absent in the drunken eyed stare of lust he gave his wife. He smiled, and then chuckled, and eventually broke into all out laughter, falling over his stool and onto the floor. O'Rourke and Astrid, though never looking at each other, both stared at their husband and host in fascination.

"Adam and Eve, you mean?" O'Rourke's honest question was enough to break the chief out of his fit of drunken hysterics.

"Uh?"

The deacon turned a page in his bible and took a moment to translate the Latin into Norse.

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

The deacon's finger skipped several lines, unbeknownst to Hiccup as he continued to look upon his wife with longing. The Irishman figured that the complexities of a certain tree and a far off land could wait until his host was more sober.

"And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the Adam said, this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

O'Rourke looked up to find Hiccup even more confused than before, whether it was what he said or the manner in which the recipient heard or both was unknown to the deacon.

"So Astridâ€¦.she has one of my ribs?"

"Okay mister off to bed." Astrid had finally tired of her husband's drunken banality and got up from O'Rourke's side, much to the deacon's relief and hauled Hiccup up from the stool he had only just remounted.

"Ahhhh but the deacon! He didn't finish the thing!"

"You can listen to your stories tomorrow, now off to bed."

Hiccup moaned as Astrid pushed him up the stairs into the bedroom. O'Rourke, comfortable to be left to read by himself, could only help but switch back to Latin as he read with a nervous and vaguely jealous smile.

"And they were both naked, the man and wife, and they were not ashamed."

* * *

><p>"Come on, harder!"<p>

"This is as hard as it gets!"

"Come on, just like I showed you before."

"I'm more than capable of controlling my own body!"

"Nonesense! How are you gonna impress a girl with that?"

"What do you know about impressing girls?"

"Enough to know that that's nearly big enough! Girls like em big!"

"Oh shut up! Like yours is any bigger!"

O'Gara found his bicep being forced to relax after an exhausting attempt to make veins appear in a desire to appear masculine. Across

the great hall, mostly deserted by this hour sat alone at a table Ruffnut Thornston. For half an hour O'Gara had tried his best to send a signal from afar. His three fellow knights and O'Neill sat around him, encouraging him in Gaelic and cursing him in Saxon. How did this even happen? Matthew and Mark sat on the table, their feet on the bench. John leaned up against the wall, subtly keeping an eye on the girl to see if O'Gara's efforts made any impact. Instead, Ruffnut kept to sharpening the knife in her hand, paying the on looking Irish little attention.

"How exactly did I let myself get dragged into this again?"

"Because O'Rourke is with the chief, O'Neill is celibate and the rest of us don't speak Norse. Thus, your life sucks."

Matthew's sarcasm may wear down upon John and O'Neill, but it always seemed to find the good spirits of O'Gara.

"I suppose it does."

"But just because of that does not mean you can stop trying Luke, back to flatteries with you." O'Neill took a bite of the chicken that had been served and stared across the hall, keeping as much a vigilant eye on the girl as O'Conner. All he needed was a convert. Anyone would do. But the fact that they forced to woo a Viking girl was not an appealing prospect to any of the Irish, much less O'Gara.

"Well then Luke, any more bright ideas?"

"Shut up Mark, it's been a while since I've actually tried to impress a lady, which is still more than you've ever done."

Whereas Matthew had the wit and prestige to get away with his sarcasm, his younger brother was a far more irritating presence in O'Gara's life. Not yet twenty, and only three years behind his brother, the youth did compensate for his bad humor with his respectable combat abilities, albeit the more they grew unused the more anxious the knight became. O'Gara turned his attention back towards the Viking girl who continued to keep her attention away from the eyes of the Irish. Before O'Gara could think of another feat of physical strength, the hall doors opened into the cool night to let in a short, dark haired figure. Snotlout, a small handful of night poppies in his hand walked with a dignified grace towards the Viking girl. Mark, on turning around to see what had brought about the change in air temperature, could only turn to his fellow knights and ask

"Who the Hell is that?"

"Believe that's the chief's cousin."

While John O'Conner remained calm in his statement, the words worried the rest of the Irish, who kept a close eye on Snotlout as he neared their collective prey.

"Okay then, any bright ideas?"

"We could go beat him up, give her a show of strength."

"John! You can't just go around and beat up the Chief's cousins to get girls! What are we, Scotsmen?"

"Mind your tone with me O'Gara. Remember what happened last time."

While Luke waved his hand to brush off John's threat, he decided to take witness for the first time to Viking courtship. He did not like what he saw. Snotlout presented the flowers, without much recognition. Then he sat down, closing in on Ruffnut smoothly. Then, a figure none of the Irish had noticed, a rather fat man with blonde hair started making his way over to the girl as well.

"Oh, now this just got interesting."

The rest of the Irish agreed with Matthew's sentiments as they all eagerly looked forward to a clash between the two Vikings, sensing that they were not the first group to be vying for the affections of this Thornston girl. The blonde man sat on the opposite side of Ruffnut. The girl found herself now between the two men, and even more uncomfortable than she had ever been under the Irish eyes. She cringed as they both closed in, each eager for a kiss. The men, each seeing the other as an intruder were then quick to insult each other as the girl slid under the table, leaving Snotlout to land an opening punch on Fishlegs' face. Fishlegs quickly countered by standing up from the table and landing a series of blows on Snotlout's chest before the two devolved into a nonsensical melee. As Ruffnut emerged from the opposite side of the table, she took a step to the side to behold the night's usual quarrel between the two suitors. She seemed to be cracking a smile at the chaos.

"That's it." O'Gara matched Ruffnut's smile as an idea, albeit a risky one appeared in his head. He turned to O'Conner who was enthralled in the fighting and mentally predicting the winner.

Here goes nothing.

"They fight even better than you do John."

The knight was broken from his thoughts at the remark.

"What was that O'Gara?"

"I mean look at them, such elegance and grace in their tactics. You could learn something from them."

"You can't be serious."

O'Gara had John where he wanted him. He stood from the bench and took a step towards his comrade.

"No, I absolutely am. Really. I mean, it's not like your current style is much better. Just look at their form, so distinguished."

John became increasingly enraged at these attacks on his fighting prowess. He took a step towards Luke, his fists beginning to clench.

"Are you looking for trouble tonight O'Gara? Did you not learn your

lesson last time?"

"No, I'd be honored if you'd teach me again."

With this provocation O'Conner lunged at O'Gara, his right arm coming back for a punch right into Luke's face. Instead, Luke grabbed the arm, threw his other hand on O'Conner's back, stepped aside, and threw him into the table. Matthew and Mark were shaken as the move stunned the rest of the hall, even bringing the confrontation between Snotlout and Fishlegs to a temporary halt. O'Conner, gripping his head in agony, got up from the maneuver and steadied himself. O'Gara took a fighting stance. It was on. John moved forward again to deliver another blow, O'Gara dodged and countered with a blow to the jaw, followed by another to the abdomen. The Irish became transfixed on the new fight, even O'Neill was too interested to step in as he often tried to do. O'Conner managed to land a punch on O'Gara's face, his superior strength sending Luke flying back towards the wall. As John came in for another blow, Luke ducked and delivered three strikes to John's abdomen again. As John reeled from the blows O'Gara closed in and grabbed the knight by his tunic, and with the last of his strength again tossed him at the table, this time over it, narrowly dodging Matthew. The knight, relieved to have not been struck by one of his own, could only look at O'Gara with surprise.

"And this accomplishes what exactly?"

Where was Ruffnut?

In the quick chaos of combat she had disappeared from the hall. Luke looked around to try and find her, being startled as he turned to his left to find her standing but a few feet away. _How had she done that?_ She took a step to bring her close to Luke, an indistinguishable visage upon her face.

"You Irish are weird."

Was that it? Had he just angered O'Conner and nearly lost a duel just for that? Perhaps his hunch was wrong. Luke's second guessing was broken as Ruffnut grabbed his tunic and pulled him close towards her, the smell of fish oil emanating off her body like a piscine cloak.

"I like that."

Before O'Gara could muster any response Ruffnut closed the final distance between the two and embraced him with a kiss. O'Gara's first in a while, far too long a while as far as he was concerned. The event however was not in his idea of how his life would unfold, and as quickly as it had happened Ruffnut had cast the Irishman aside and began to walk out of the hall. Stunned, as if suddenly struck by a sword, Luke turned back towards his comrades, who could only eye him with a congratulatory attitude and comradery; with the exception of O'Conner, who merely lay on the other side of the table, too weak and tired to muster much of a response to anything. O'Neill got up from what remained of his meal and gave O'Gara a pat on the back. Matthew was quick to begin his jesting again.

"Well if there's hope for you O'Gara there's hope for all of us."

"How was it?" Mark joined in with his brother.

"She smells like rotten cod."

"Good, you two have something in common already."

"Shut up Matthew."

O'Gara turned to the bishop, confused and intimidated at the very thought of being kissed by a Viking girl.

"I'm going to Hell for this aren't I?"

The Bishop managed only a slight smile.

"We'll see when you get there."

4. Praise and Insults

****Words...they can be tricky things to manage...****

* * *

><p>Despite her best efforts Astrid could not find herself to fall back asleep. After Hiccup woke up per Toothless' usual request, his hung-over mind had left him unable to properly wander about the room. She had gotten up, dressed him and shown him out the door. She knew she shouldn't let him drink and fly, but when you fly with a Night Fury that regularly has to catch you to protect you from death in solo flight, what's the worst that could happen? Despite never being particularly privy to this time of day, Astrid figured she might as well accept the prospect of facing the day bright and early again. Though winter was still a few weeks away from its true wrath, the air was growing colder with each passing day. Astrid was quick to wrap herself in her best bearskin coat and made herself ready. A nice morning flight around the neighboring islands should get her nice and prepped for the day. She opened the bedroom door to find Valka enjoying her own breakfast, acknowledging her daughter in law only with a smile and nod of her head.<p>

"Morning Valka."

"Heard Hiccup was quite the sight last night."

"Nothing I can't handle."

Astrid grabbed some bread she would eat on the way, before noticing an emptiness in the kitchen that she was growing familiar with.

"Where's our little Irish guest?"

"Left a little while after Hiccup, think I saw him head up into the mountains."

"He's an odd one he is."

"He's Irish, I've heard they usually are."

Astrid smiled at her mother in law as she closed the front door behind her. The village was still quiet, save the occasional dragon out for its own independent morning flight. Stormfly knew to at least wait until late morning for Astrid, if she wasn't there she'd take off on her own. Astrid was glad to find the dragon was already awake and moving about, and the dragon returned the optimism with a light caw.

"Morning girl, want to fly today?"

The dragon nuzzled Astrid, purring as it did so.

"Why do I even ask?"

Astrid was quick to saddle and mount her dragon, feeling the usual confidence and self pride that being on the back of a Nadder gave oneself. She gave a pat on the back of the dragon's neck, a usual morning treat for the beast.

"Okay, girl, let's go."

Without seeming to let a second pass after the words were said, the Nadder burst forth into the air with a fury, the love of flight as prevalent in its blood at this hour as at any other.

* * *

><p>Though her cheeks burned, this pain was always welcome to Astrid. It was indicative of a good flight, and her dragon agreed. The two made their approach back to Berk at a leisurely pace. Astrid could take as long as she needed as far as she was concerned. The solitude of the air gave her time to reflect on events, and there were many to reflect upon.<p>

Why now? Why did the Irish have to show up now? Did Hiccup not have a difficult enough life as it was? Astrid could see below her Berk's harbor, still in as weary shape as it was six years ago. At the far right of the collection of the wharves and jetties was an old warehouse, too small for the trade that bustled in and out of Berk at this point. Five Irishmen were stationed there, and probably still sleeping. Why did they have to wash up here of all places? Couldn't Thor have granted them good sailing to Scotland?

"Hang on girl, we're not going home yet."

Astrid patted Stormfly and kept her flying straight, the Irish house fading from view as Stormfly soared over the village. She flew past her house, Toothless seemingly absent. Hiccup still wasn't back yet, probably taking an extra long flight to work through his hangover, poor thing. Astrid's stomach growled violently. Her bread, had she really forgotten to eat it after all this time? Then again she had been up in air performing maneuvers all this time, it wouldn't have been wise to have a full stomach.

"Come on Stormfly, let's settle down someplace nice."

Though Astrid had another place in mind, her attention was soon drawn to a field high up near the mountain. From her grand view she could see a lone figure, shrouded in black and sitting in a field. Curious,

Astrid decided it was as good a place as any to settle down, as she grew more and more certain of the identity of the figure. High grasses surrounded a depression where Daniel O'Rourke sat cross legged, again entranced in his Bible. His mumblings over a page were broken as Stormfly settled in the high grasses, Astrid dismounting and saying hello.

"So this is where you've been running off to these past few days."

O'Rourke was cautious to give a direct look at Astrid, only managing one of the quick, nervous glances that drove Astrid crazy.

"Yeah, it's rather nice out here, perfect place for prayer."

Astrid took her loaf of bread out of the bag as Stormfly, crunching the grasses under her feet, began to collapse on the ground and convulse in ecstasy. O'Rourke was startled by the sudden erratic movements of the beast.

"What is it doing?"

"Oh, mountain mint. Dragon's love the stuff, just a handful can render them useless for a half hour. Then if you burn itâ€¦let's just say you're grounded for a while."

Astrid was pleased to see the color return to O'Rourke's face as Stormfly settled in a pile of crushed mountain mint having reached the draconic equivalent of Nirvana. Astrid tore off a piece of bread and tossed it to the deacon, sitting down two feet away, knowing the Irishman was uncomfortable with her company for whatever reason.

"What are you reading?"

Astrid took a bite of her bread as O'Rourke began to muster his courage to speak.

"Wellâ€¦my Bible."

Astrid found the Irishman even more roundabout and difficult to talk to than Hiccup before Toothless.

"Yesâ€¦but what _exactly_ are you reading?" Astrid was equally if not more curious than Hiccup to the contents of the deacon's beloved book. She had seen last night the bright colors and inlays and intricate details put into its manufacture, though such beauty was now diminished following the parchment's ordeal in sea water.

"Just uhâ€¦just reflecting on a Psalm."

"A what?"

O'Rourke knew he would have to engage in a longer conversation than he was prepared for with his female host, and steadied his speech.

"A psalm, it's an old prayer that the Jews used to pray with beforeâ€¦"

"The who?"

O'Rourke mentally whipped himself for drawing the conversation out even longer, but persevered.

"The Jews were the first worshippers of our God. They predicted a savior would come and save them from their oppression by the Romans. We- Christians- believe that Jesus was that savior, that he came not to lead the Jews to a military victory or bring forth an empire, but to redeem our souls and teach us how to enter heaven. Some Jews however were less than impressed with Jesus, and worked with the Romans to have him put to death. It's been a rather contentious point between our two peoples ever since."

"So these psalms are the prayers of these other people? Why do you not then say your own prayers?"

"Well, they are still prayers to the same God. It does not matter who says them."

"So then if you both pray to the same God, doesn't that mean you and the Jews are essentially the same?"

O'Rourke smiled at Astrid's ignorance, knowing not to overwhelm her with the complexities of dogma for right now.

"Yes, one would think that."

Astrid could see the Irishman wanted to return to his reading, but persisted in her queries.

"So can you read me this psalm?"

O'Rourke managed another slight glance to Astrid as he stammered in saying yes. Astrid had enough and grabbed the deacon by the collar pulling him close and forcing him to stare into her eyes.

"Do I look threatening? Look at me when you talk to me, it's frustrating when you don't." Astrid tossed the Irishman back into his seat, visibly distraught. He recomposed himself as Astrid took another bite of her bread.

"Okay. Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.' I say of the holy people who are in the land, 'They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.' Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips. Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."

O'Rourke sighed as he finished, and by her wish looked directly at

Astrid for the first time. Her confident face was shaken amidst the soft spoken words of the deacon. She was not used to such skillfully written and delivered prose, nor did she expect it from a foreign book. So beautifully crafted, each word having a purpose. And so beautifully said. Astrid had not expected such strength and passion to come from the wily Irishman, and it made her uncomfortable. She looked for a response to break the silence, to stop the deacon's awkward stare as it anxiously awaited the Astrid's thoughts.

"Nice isn't it?"

"Umâ€¦.yeah."

Astrid took a final bite of her bread and found herself being the one looking the other way for once. She looked back to Stormfly, still enthralled in burying herself in the mountain mint. Astrid had to change the subject, something to get back to a more serious topic. Whether fortunate or not, the silence was broken by the shriek of Toothless as he descended down the mountain. While Astrid was happy Hiccup had returned safely, the noise brought a scowl to O'Rourke's face. Astrid decided it was as good a time as any to press the issue, in that there couldn't possibly be a worse time

"Soâ€¦.I never got to say my condolences about your past."

O'Rourke's sudden boost of confidence dissipated amidst the torrent of memory. Astrid kicked herself mentally at bringing this up, but she had panicked under the circumstances.

"Look, I don't mean to make you feel bad, it's just thatâ€¦"

"No, no that's okay. It is I who should apologize for letting my emotions get the better of me last time."

Silence befell the two again as both looked for a way to move the conversation forward. Astrid discovered a way to both restore the momentum and have perhaps a nice surprise for Hiccup when she returned home.

"So, do you know what happened to it?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The Night Fury, is it still in Ireland?"

While Astrid had expected the conversation to move quickly, O'Rourke took a moment to gather a response.

"No actually. No itâ€¦.it left a year after that night. That was a long year for all of us. We were just boys again, but O'Neill was in his best fitness, and he wanted vengeance. First it was to Limerick, then Cashel, then Waterford and Wexford. Wherever it was spotted, that was where O'Neill went, and we went with him. That's how we picked up O'Conner. We found him wounded in the street in Wexford, or what remained of it anyways. He joined us on every hunt since then, and helped protect us many times from attacks by other dragons. He's a very competent warrior, even if he comes off as a bitâ€¦lacking."

O'Rourke made sure to steady himself a moment lest he let his emotions better him again.

"And then, it vanished. Just like that. Disappeared for years, much to the relief of the whole island. Nobody heard anything about it, and that was fine by us. We already had enough problems with other dragons, nobody was eager to bring the unholy offspring of lightning and death back upon us. Then a year ago we started hearing stories, rumors at first but later more substantiated reports that it had reappeared in the Scottish Highlands. O'Neill hasn't been quite the same since. He got us all a ship at Dublin, and so here we are... not that I'm complaining.

Daniel managed all his confidence into a smile directed at Astrid, though the woman could only keep her eyes away as she recalled something Hiccup had told her about O'Neill.

"Wait, I thought you were going to Scotland to pay your respects to another Bishop."

O'Rourke withdrew from his playful smile and went back to a more serious tone.

"Yes, but to get an Irishman to do anything he must first be doing something else. We were certainly intent on giving our respects to Father Madden, but after that it would be up into the mountains for us."

O'Rourke leaned forward towards Astrid, regaining a confidence he was finding increasingly useful.

"Out of the twenty men on our boat, aside from the Bishop, myself and the other two deacons- may God bless their souls- they were all knights. We were to go into the mountains, we would hunt for the Night Fury, we would find the Night Furyâ€¦."

O'Rourke flipped his bible to its back cover, revealing built into it a pouch which concealed a small and slim knife. He pulled it out carefully, not wanting to alarm Astrid. He gestured it into the air and made a jabbing and twisting motion.

"And we would kill it."

Astrid was surprised by this new information, and knew she could certainly wait to tell Hiccup about it. O'Rourke beat her to breaking the new silence.

"God it seems has had other plans for us."

His smile, which Astrid knew was a rare occurrence eased the frustration of the moment. Overhead, Astrid noticed a black silhouette against the sky, moving with great speed and spinning in the gathering breeze. Hiccup was home, time to make him some herbal tea for his headache and deal with his moping.

"Can I give you a lift home?"

O'Rourke looked to the Nadder rolling around in the grass that seemed to sulk at Astrid's return, knowing it would torn away from the joy it had relished in for the past several minutes. His confidence again

receded as he put his small knife back into his Bible. He should probably stay and say a few more psalms.

"Uhâ€¦no thanks. I should probably stay andâ€¦read a few more Psalms."

Astrid shrugged as Stormfly stood up and ready. She was coming to accept that his Irishman was certainly different, one she didn't have to worry about, and one to keep her eye on.

"Suit yourself."

* * *

><p>Just a little more than twenty four hours remained until the ceremony, and Hiccup couldn't be more miserable. As Astrid brought him a second cup of herbal tea to sooth his headache, he found the warm beverage was of little relief to his heart. Valka was out for her own morning flight, probably jumping off a mountain and letting Cloudjumper catch her just before hitting the ocean. Standard maneuver for a rider of her class. Though Astrid could sense her husband's pain, she wasn't sure how to bring up the topic in a way that wouldn't further Hiccup's suffering. She could instead only bring up the events of the morning as she sat by Hiccup's side, keeping her body close as a comfort.<p>

"So I found out where our pet Irishman is hiding out most of the day."

"Mmh...really?"

"Up in the mountain mint fields, spotted him this morning during my flight."

"Still reading his precious book?"

"Yeah."

Hiccup stared back at his beverage, and remembered how much better mountain mint tea would have been on a day like today.

"Why now Astrid?"

Astrid needed no further explanation for what her husband meant. She wrapped an arm around his back and brought her face close, trying her best to calm Hiccup's weary soul.

"Hiccup, I'm sure everything will turn out for the better. Odin's just testing you, making sure you're all the chief you're cranked up to be."

Hiccup smiled slightly at the complement, but found he was unable to pull himself from his misery. Astrid embraced him in a complete hug in a continued if frustratingly vain effort to relieve her husband of his woes.

"I just don't know what I'm supposed to do. How do you deal with something likeâ€¦like this? How would anyone, how wouldâ€¦how would he deal with it?"

Astrid could see where the conversation was going, and was could sense the dread in Hiccup's voice.

"I just can't help but think. You know, what would he do? Would he cast them out? Would he welcome them? You know how stubborn he could be."

"Hiccup," Astrid whispered softly into his ear, her last and best hope for comforting him, "I'm sure he would do whatever was right, the gods would judge him in the end."

Though the words were of little substance, they were said with enough sincerity for Hiccup to find some relief for the day. He finally turned to his wife, but an inch from his face.

"Let's just hope the gods viewed him well enough."

"Hiccup, you can't let this haunt you forever. Yes it was tragic, but you can't let this cloud your judgment, especially now. What's done is done, and what will be done will be done." Astrid knew she was being more confrontational then she should have been with that phrase, but she needed to break Hiccup out of his funk one way or another.

"I know Astrid, it's justâ€¦it's justâ€¦"

Hiccup struggled to find the words to express his nervousness any more eloquently than

"I'm worried."

"About what?"

"You know. You know what ifâ€¦what if the Irish are right?"

Astrid was surprised to hear such conflict and uncertainty from Hiccup. Granted they were both traits endemic to him, but not ones she had come to see much in their past year together.

"What do you mean?"

Hiccup's eyes darted back and forth between his tea and his wife before mustering to courage to admit his worries.

"What if the Irish are right? What if there is only one god? What if we've been wrong all this time? What ifâ€¦what if people actually abandon the old ways? What then?"

The thought had not occurred to Astrid of people actually converting to the Irish way, but the more she considered it, the more she realized it was a distinct possibility. After all, if even half of what the Christians believed was as well phrased as what O'Rourke had read to her, Berk could be erecting crosses by the end of the year. She could only sigh as she leaned in for a kiss on Hiccup's cheek, hoping to bring back some of the confidence she had come to know from him.

"I'm sure you'll think of something." Hiccup was quick to return the favor of the kiss.

O'Rourke entered the great hall to find his fellow Irishmen gathered around a table near the far end. A girl seemed to be fawning over O'Gara incessantly as the knight kept up a visibly distraught appearance. As O'Rourke made his way over to reunite with his comrades, he was given many a strange and distrustful stare by the Vikings who chose to eat here at midday. While they were few in number, the aggression in their glances amplified their size a hundred times. Daniel was confident that the goings on of his brothers had done little to alleviate this. Bible still held firmly in hand, he felt his heart race slightly upon rejoining his comrades for the first time in two days, and was eager to finally be able to speak in Gaelic again. Matthew was the first to welcome him over.

"And the prodigal son returns!"

Daniel managed a slight smile as he took a seat next to Matthew and across from O'Gara, who relieved to have something to distract him from his forced wooing of Ruffnut Thorntson. O'Neill, two seats across from O'Rourke's leaned left across the table as much as his aging body allowed him and began to interrogate the deacon almost soon as he became comfortable on the hard oak bench.

"Well?"

O'Rourke wasn't sure on how to respond.

"Well...what...Father?"

"Has the beast tried to eat you yet?"

"The Night Fury? No." O'Rourke knew he was playing a dangerous game, and was not willing, despite his past, to reveal his feelings to an aged Gael on a vendetta.

"Just you wait, I'm sure it's savoring you." O'Conner was as interested in O'Neill in learning all he could about the deacon's recent encounters with the devils.

"Did you see the chief using magic? Did he draw pentagrams? Is there some kind of spell that is performed over them?"

"Um..." O'Rourke needed to stay in the good graces of his comrades for now, and found himself agonizingly crafting a lie for what felt like the first time in his life. "Magic...yes. It's a mix of...plants. Yes. They use a mix of plants. I managed to swipe some from them to show you..."

O'Rourke pulled out from his bible several strands of mountain mint he had been using to cleanse the book of sea smell and presented it to the Irish, genuinely fascinated at seeing how the devil's minions were controlled.

"Mountain mint. That's what they call it. I've seen it used to render the dragons servile. They mix it with...pines and fish oil to make a potion. Then they rub it over the beast's noses and they become docile towards humans. Then the Vikings take control of them, but I am still to figure out how.

"I knew it!" Mark exclaimed as he took an interest in the conversation. His brother turned to him in frustration.

"No you didn't!"

"Did too!"

"Prove it!"

"I would if O'Rourke would give me that mint!"

"Umâ€|no. Iâ€|stole it from them to show you all. They would notice if anything had happened to it." O'Rourke was not proud of himself for lying. He was less proud about lying about a crime, though he consoled himself in knowing it was better than actually committing a crime.

"The deacon makes a good point." O'Neill decided. O'Rourke was relieved that his ruse had worked, but he felt increasingly nervous now amidst the camaraderie of his fellow Celts. He knew enough from Matthew and John that when lying it was best to get out of the conversation or situation as quickly as possible. An estrogen infused outlet conveniently lay across from the deacon, who couldn't help but notice the usually reserved and tempered O'Gara locking lips with a girl who reeked of rotten cod.

"Umâ€|.what is this?"

O'Gara welcomed relief from the piscine lips of Ruffnut to breathe and make a response in Gaelic so as not to disturb his forced love interest.

"You're with the chief, O'Neill is celibate and the rest of us don't speak Norse, as a result my life currently sucks." O'Gara managed to smile back at the dazed lips he held in his arms and took advantage of Ruffnut's incomprehension of Gaelic to say

"You look like death and kiss like it too."

"Yeah baby." Ruffnut replied, assuming the words to be a style of Irish courtship. O'Rourke, as confused as when he walked in, turned towards O'Neill for an answer.

"Yesâ€|well you see we've made a deal with a Viking here who's been harassed by this girl that we'll take her off his back if he'll be baptized, I figured it might be a good first step towards converting the island."

O'Rourke was surprised to hear such a fiendish plan emerge from the mind of the Bishop, though knowledge of his surroundings forced him to keep a stone face.

"Isn't that a bit of a sin father? To bribe someone into conversion."

O'Neill seemed to pay no mind to the deacon's commentary, and had a response prepared for just such an occasion.

"Not a sin my child, an indulgence. Mere earthly misgivings are no

matter when the soul finds redemption in Heaven." O'Rourke managed to make himself agree with the bishop amidst the company he kept as a shadow overcame his heart.

"I suppose so. An indulgence."

O'Gara fell over backwards as Ruffnut lunged herself close to his chest, adrenaline and estrogen pumping through her veins. O'Rourke found himself increasingly uncomfortable in his surroundings, and almost felt being indoors with the Night Fury would be a better way to spend the afternoon. As Ruffnut kicked the table in her ecstasy, O'Rourke used it as an excuse to get up, and try to find a way out of the stares of his fellow Celts.

"Well I should be goingâ€¦you knowâ€¦I've to get back to work. You know, the magic and stuff."

O'Neill viewed his spiritual apprentice with confidence and appreciation, and raised his goblet towards him with respect and sent him off with a blessing.

"You're a braver Christian than me my child, may god watch over you with that Hell-spawn so near you."

O'Rourke could only nod in appreciation before turning his back on his comrades where his visage turned to one of dismay as he walked back out of the hall, feeling regretful that his meeting had not gone as planned. He could have told them the truth, he could have told them what he had learned. He could have told them about the goodness in chief Hiccup, and Astrid.

Astrid. She was hanging on his thoughts again. He was a sinner. He had lust, and he had lied. Sin.

No. Not a sin, an indulgence.

* * *

><p>The warmth of the forge was especially welcome on a cold and humid day to Hiccup. He raised his arm and beat down of the glowing red metal bar in front of him. Despite his dual duties of being a chief and husband, he still managed at least once a week to sneak in some time at the forge. Even if it was just hammering out some support casings for an ale cask, it was the rhythm and precision of his old trade that kept him going. The heat, the movement, the delicate dance of fire and iron that he controlled never lost the allure that had first enthralled him when he was a boy. Gobber worked in silence behind him, banging out a knife that nobody would use, the need for an abundance of sharp weapons had dissipated these past few years, a fact which still saddened Gobber. Toothless lay curled up near the forge where Grump kept the fires blazing with his extraordinary fire. Hiccup wiped a small deal of sweat from his brow as he dunked the metal rod into water, the smell of condensing iron tickling his nose as steam brushed his cheeks. He pulled the rod out, still hot at its core but darkened and hardened enough to be laid to rest on a wooden bench.<p>

"Soâ€¦." Gobber decided to finally speak up, if quietly for the first time since Hiccup had entered the forge. "â€¦big day tomorrow."

Hiccup was disheartened to continue thinking about the ceremony, but Astrid had managed to at least partially raise his spirits for the day. Her telling him of the possibility of another Night Fury in Scotland had rallied him, though he had a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that either O'Rourke was not telling Astrid, or she was not telling Hiccup the full truth. Still, acceptance had slowly come to him that tomorrow would come, it would pass, and it would be over. The first year was the hardest as Valka routinely told him. It sometimes surprised Hiccup how much better she dealt with the death of her husband than Hiccup. He figured it might have had something to do with their twenty years apart. When you say goodbye once, it is easier the second time.

"Yeahâ€¦big day tomorrow."

It was all Hiccup could manage for a response. He switched his grasping tool for a hammer and began to lightly tap away at the metal rod he worked on, banging out a few kinks he had left in the sloppiness of his lack of practice. He knew Stoick's death had hit Gobber just as hard as it hit him, perhaps even more severely. It had taken two months before Gobber would even go near Toothless again, he being one of the few who actually knew of the reality of his friend's death.

Hiccup had made it a point upon Drago's defeat to make the few present at the battle swear an oath never to reveal the truth of what happened to Stoick. He had even made Astrid and Valka do so in his own paranoia. As far the village was concerned, Drago had run Stoick through with a sword when his back was turned. It was a dishonorable death committed to an honorable man, it served to demonize Drago and finalize Stoick's memory as a brave and respectable man, and that's all the village would ever need to know.

"Crazy times these days."

Gobber was a master of summing up the unpleasant or the chaotic into a single phrase when the situation warranted it, and the situation did indeed. Gobber moved behind Hiccup to grab a large hammer, his more primitive wooden leg nearly tripping over Hiccup's more advanced and competent design. He had offered many times to make one for Gobber, but the man was as set in his ways as any Viking worth his salt, and insisted his wooden stump was just as effective as Hiccup's metallic leg.

"Yeah, crazy times."

What was Hiccup going to do with the Irish? It bothered him every moment not dedicated to his work, and occasionally while during the work itself. O'Rourke was nice enough, but then there was O'Neill. He grew more and more on Hiccup's nerves with each passing day. He and his band of knights were a constant annoyance to him, both in their speech and in their customs.

Faith. Men of faith is what O'Rourke called himself and O'Neill. Hiccup couldn't bring himself to trust anyone of them fully. Why now? Why of all times now? Hiccup knew the spirit of his father stayed with him, he swore at times he could feel it. He wanted what was best for the village. But what was best? O'Rourke was manageable, even approachable about his beliefs. But O'Neill, his attitude and

conviction grated Hiccup. Two different breeds of Irishmen, and only one decision could be made about them.

"Weird people those Irish."

Hiccup had heard too many of the same fears and complaints over the past few days. He was not the only one skeptical of the visitors from a Southern island. Many wondered if they would try to take over in a coup, as ridiculous a notion as any as far as Hiccup was concerned. Then there were those who had cautioned Hiccup about mysterious going's on in the Irish warehouse, the burning of plants and the constant recitation of strange words. He had even had one or two unpleasant conversations with younger girls on the Island who were allowing their first crushes to be upon some of the admittedly well groomed knights, one girl even pleading with Hiccup to give the Irish back their weapons just so she could see a sword in use by her crush. Then there was Ruff, her sudden infatuation with one of the knights had Tuff constantly complaining to Hiccup for the past 36 hours, not that Hiccup could blame a protective twin.

Then, then there was one issue that had disturbed him greatly. On his walk to the forge, Helga had pulled him aside for a few minutes, and with hesitation had told Hiccup the last thing he wanted to hear. Despite the seemingly unanimous roars of the crowd he had seen heckle and mock the Irish, there were a few including Helga- mostly women-who had an interest in what the Irish had to say. They felt something odd inside themselves, a fascination with the words they would sometimes say, and a few admitted crushes as well. Hiccup couldn't understand it, and tried his best not to distract himself with it. It could wait.

"Yeah, crazy people the Irish."

Hiccup was satisfied with the final adjustments he made to the iron bar, and again doused it in water to continue to cool it. He wanted to distract himself anyway he could, but knew he would eventually have to face the problem head on. He could only hope when the time came for that he would still have the women of Berk at his side, for if they fell to the charms of the Irish, the men would surely be forced to follow suit.

His attention was quickly drawn to his right when O'Neill and his entourage made their way to the top of the hill the village sat on from the docks where they were quartered. A Nadder was quick to approach them out of curiosity to the smell of imported incense that even Hiccup could smell from many yards away. The Irish were quick to back away from the inquisitive dragon, only to have a Terrible Terror sneak up behind O'Conner and latch onto his back. The bulky Irishmen was quick to grab it and through it down onto the ground forcefully, preparing to stomp it out of existence. Toothless, awakened by the commotion and sensing one of his fellow dragons in distress, kicked up a pot as he bristled with anger at the foreigners, baring his teeth and snarling just enough to get the Irish's attention. Hiccup was quick to put himself between the two as Toothless advanced slowly in an effort to intimidate the Irish, which despite Hiccup's opposite desires did indeed work well.

"No! No. Toothless, stop it. Call off the dragons."

One Alpha conceded to the other and the Night Fury, still keeping

constricted pupils on the Irish mentally alerted the nearby dragons to back off the Irish. O'Neill brandished his walking cross towards the Night Fury in a sign either of bravery or cowardice. Hiccup kept an arm outstretched as he walked towards the Irish.

"Bishop! You must understand they won't hurt you!"

"One of the wretches attacked my knight!" O'Neill proclaimed aloud, evidently frustrated by the calm exuded by Hiccup amidst the savage beasts.

"Only cause ye wreak of that bloody incense!" Gobber interjected. O'Conner was surprised to hear such force from the previously quiet man, and found himself mildly unnerved by the slurred if dominating proclamation he could not understand. Hiccup took advantage of the temporary silence to gain the initiative of the conversation.

"Bishop, you must certainly see by now our dragons mean you no harm. Just don't antagonize them and you'll be fine. Calm down."

O'Neill placed his staff back into a neutral position as the Nadder and Terrible Terror had both taken a good distance from the group. Toothless kept a strong, predatory watch over the Irish and relished in seeing concern in their faces at his slightest movements. O'Neill gathered his confidence in the presence of his worst enemy and took a step towards Hiccup, earning him a nasty snarl from the Night Fury.

"Chief Hiccup, perhaps you are comfortable in working the devil's minions, but a good Irishman never forgets the savagery impressed upon his life."

Hiccup allowed his expression to finally reveal the disdain he had for O'Neill directly.

"For Odin's sake Stephenâ€|" Hiccup was as surprised as the Irish for addressing the Bishop by his first name. Hiccup's diplomatic skills were failing him, but his frustration was overpowering. "â€| the dragons are not devils! They are amazing, wonderful creatures and if you would just take the time to get to understand them both you and I could be much happier."

"And I suppose we are to just forget all our beliefs, all of our past for the sake of your ways? Abandon all that we know to appease the worker of black magic?"

"Is not black magic ya idiot!" Gobber again was quick to silence the Irish, his presence closer to Hiccup's side was a comfort to the chief and a worry for the knights, who were remembering now that they were still without their swords, O'Conner fixed his gaze on an axe inside the shop with a savory eye. O'Neill kept a relatively confident face as he moved to retaliate.

"Chief Hiccup, as much as I appreciate you taking us in and your hospitality, understand that we simply cannot tolerate the presence ofâ€|.dragons so close to us. You may not understand, but they are the devil's creation, spawned from his mouth as he was cast downâ€|.

"I understand the dragons infinitely better than you ever could you old, ignorant worthless Celt!"

Now it was out. Formalities had been discarded in the name of honesty as they often had to be. The knights all looked to each other for mutual guidance at seeing their Bishop so directly insulted, by a heathen no less. The non Nose speakers could sense the hostility in Hiccup's raised voice and aggressive tone. Toothless snarled again at them, sensing the anger of his friend. O'Neill, shaken but not dismayed continued to escalate the situation.

"We are guided by divine wisdom, by experience and knowledge. We have not let ourselves be deceived by the devil's work in thisâ€¦"

"You think we always had it easy dealing with dragons? We had been fighting them for generations untilâ€¦" Hiccup paused to consider for a moment his pivotal role in the situation of Berk, and smiled with a touch of hubris. "I learned how to tame them, train them, broke their control from a real demon and brought peace! We are good people, and the dragons are good creatures, right Toothless?"

The Night Fury walked forward slowly, his eyes still trained on the Irish, O'Conner and O'Neill especially. Still he took his place by Hiccup's side and purred, though the innocence of the occasion was lost on the Irish who could only help but stare into the green, reptilian eyes that veiled a mind contemplating how the man with the walking stick could be dismembered to make the Night Fury's master happy. O'Neill still persisted in achieving an argumentative victory.

"We have been taught for generations of their wickedness, and you expect us to forget that to take the words of a heathen? A barbarian who has a temporary truce with the devils?"

Hiccup started to have flashbacks to the early days of the truce on Berk, when many were still skeptical of the creatures that had tormented them for so long. Hiccup couldn't linger long on this though, as he registered that he had just been insulted by his guest. He supposed it within the proper realms of this conversation, but he still quite angered as being addressed as a barbarian, as if his metallic leg was not contrary enough to that.

"We spent too long fighting, too long trying to live the way we wanted to live, to continue going on. We had to change, change or risk losing everything. So we did, and we gained a whole lot more. More than a Christian could ever understand."

It had just gotten personal, the great barrier that divided Hiccup and O'Neill had been approached. The bishop saw his faith under attack and rallied himself to act in accordance with his station.

"You dare question the workings and will of God? You who even as we speak make preparations to commit blasphemy and worship false idols?"

If only the question had been asked, the conversation would have gone on as usual. But O'Neill had made a gesture that left Gobber's jaw aghast, and Hiccup's eyes vengeful. O'Neill, looking for an object to demonstrate his point had with his hand gestured to the ever present

statue of Stoick the Vast. The knights behind the Bishop were visibly worried at the silence that befell the oral combatants, and the Night Fury that could sense the wounded pride of its master.

Hiccup found his hand reaching for his sword, slowly but steadily creeping down his left side towards the blade. He could do it. He could take it out right now and ram its flaming blade through O'Neill's throat before he even knew what hit him. He could kill all the Irish, they were unarmed, easy prey. Then what of O'Rourke? What then if Hiccup killed all his companions? Hiccup found himself using all his self control to keep his hand off the sword, knowing full well he would indeed release his fury the moments his fingers touched it.

"Thatâ€¦statueâ€¦." Hiccup's tone was one of consternation and rage, but he found deep inside himself enough self control to keep the situation only one of words, not of swords. "Is of my father-Stoick the Vast. We are having a ceremony tomorrow to honor him on the first anniversary of his death."

The color drained from O'Neill's face as he realized the magnitude of his actions, and worry for both his reputation and life came over him in force.

"I'mâ€¦.sorry. I didn'tâ€¦"

The Irishman's attempt to make right by his heinous actions were the last straw for Hiccup, who could only manage a "shut up" as he walked away, done in dealing with O'Neill for the day. Toothless followed behind, his tail swinging at and knocking O'Neill back into the arms of the knights with a shock. A Night Fury and a furious man strode in tandem towards Hiccup's house where he just wanted to get away. Gobber eyed the Irishmen with contempt and got back to his work, the Irish deciding it best to retire back to their warehouse than risk more confrontation with the Vikings.

Hiccup wanted to hit something, or cut something, or stab something. He wanted to hurt _something._ In a rare occasion for him he genuinely wanted to cause pain. Just something to let loose the pain he felt. Toothless rubbed against his side, trying to ease the aggression he felt emanating off his friend. Hiccup could only manage a slight pat on the dragon's head. He just hoped O'Rourke wasn't in his house, or he might take out his aggression on the lone innocent Irishman. Hiccup stopped to take a moment to behold his father's statue, the beginnings of preparations for tomorrow had begun, and flowers began to adorn the feet of the monument. He would have vengeance for the insult.

Vengeance for his father.

Vengeance for the village. He swore this to the gods.

His gods.

5. Changing Perceptions

"The more I see, the less I know for sure."-John Lennon

* * *

><p>"â€|Only it wasn't his wife, but his daughter!"<p>

Despite not being comfortable with the subject matter, O'Rourke managed a smile at Valka as she finished her anecdote. A long morning of recitation had left the deacon mentally drained, and he found the simple conversation with Valka over humorous anecdotes and strange occurrences allowed his more worldly side a chance to stretch.

"Reminds me of a story we have in Ireland of O'Leary's Nine Stepsons."

"Oh! I've heard that one!"

"Ha!" O'Rourke found himself more at ease in talking with Valka than Hiccup, and certainly more so than Astrid.

Damn it...focus you sinner focus...

"Soâ€|.how long has Hiccup been running the village? He seems awfullyâ€|well young."

Valka became visibly distraught over discussing the details, but spoke before O'Rourke could have a chance to offer her a chance not to speak of the matter.

"Our last chief, Stoick, will have died a year ago tomorrow. We're having a ceremony and celebration of his memory. You're welcome to come if you'd like."

O'Rourke found the only way to properly move the conversation along was to go forward with it.

"So, you're Hiccup's mother."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, when you say goodbye once, it's easier the second time around."

O'Rourke had heard of Valka's two decade long absence from Berk and of her time spent among the dragons, he would have to ask her about it another time, but felt such a lengthy conversation could wait until later. An air of compassion hung in the air as both looked for a way to move back onto a more lighthearted topic. Perhaps they could exchange their favorite part about the story of O'Leary's Nine Stepsons. Before he could request such a thing, Hiccup opened the door with aggression, the uncommon look of rage upon his face.

"Ah, Hiccup! We were just talking about the ceremony tomorrow, I figured I'd invite our guest along if that's alright."

Hiccup could only stare at O'Rourke with seething anger, an anger Daniel was confused by. Had he done something to upset his host? Was it improper custom to talk to the chief's mother without the chief's consent? If so, why not his wife? O'Rourke was confused as Valka inquired to her son's mood.

"Hiccup, are you alright?" She was genuinely concerned, it was not often she saw her son with such negative emotion wrought on his face. Hiccup merely kept his gaze at O'Rourke, and then shut the door back behind him. The deacon looked to Valka perplexed.

"What's with him?"

"I don't know." Valka rose from her seat and headed out to talk to her son. O'Rourke, fearful he had done something wrong followed. The day was cold and humid, O'Rourke could feel an autumn storm coming on by the end of the day. He and Valka found Hiccup harnessing Toothless, every pull on the saddle and stirrups aggressive, though the Night Fury did not seem to mind his master's extra force.

"Hiccup? Hiccup what's wrong?"

Hiccup turned and faced the two, and noticed O'Rourke didn't have his book with him. Perfect. He pointed quickly with a free hand to Daniel, who was concerned at the harshness of his host's mannerisms.

"You-you scared of heights?"

O'Rourke gestured a finger to himself , confused by the question.

"Me? Umâ€¦I guess."

"Good, get on."

"Umâ€¦What?"

"You and I are going for a ride. Get over here."

O'Rourke cautiously approached Hiccup, still unsure where his aggressive tone was coming from. Toothless, knowing only that O'Rourke belonged to the same group that had upset his master, growled as Daniel approached. Hiccup laid a hand on the Night Fury as he began to control his rage.

"It's okay bud, he's not one of them."

One of whom? O'Rourke began to have a nagging feeling something had gone down between Hiccup and his fellow Irishmen. He kept a safe distance from Hiccup as the chief finished the saddle adjustments on the Night Fury and mounted it with ease, extending a hand to O'Rourke.

"Well? I don't have all day."

O'Rourke, not sure why he was complying with the request to mount the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself still found the courage to hop on the back of the creature. Toothless, while uncomfortable with having a second person on his back could manage the scrawny and young O'Rourke, who rapidly began having second thoughts about what he was doing.

"Soâ€¦are we justâ€¦"

"Hang on."

"Wha-?"

Before O'Rourke could even register it, he found himself rapidly ascending towards the clouds, the rush of dark, flapping wings beside him and the cool humid air gushing past his ears. He could only manage to scream out of terror and fascination as he found himself, a simple Irishman, soon soaring amidst the clouds above. As he struggled to find a comfortable way to maintain his balance on the back of the Night Fury, he clutched the cross beneath his tunic and found himself shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name!"

"Oh give it a rest!"

Hiccup sent Toothless into a roll as O'Rourke gripped Hiccup in fear, unsure of his ability to stay on for long amidst the dizzying aerial maneuvers impressed upon him.

"And now the spinning!"

Hiccup was exuberant to proclaim such a feat as O'Rourke hung on for dear life, the sky and the ground rapidly switching places again and again as he felt the tea had recently consumed forcing its way slowly up the back of his throat.

"Oh dear God in heaven help me!"

Though Hiccup was not swayed by O'Rourke's words, he felt as though he had worked out enough of he and Toothless' immediate aggression to begin to have a conversation with Daniel, and set Toothless on a cruising course over the island. Hiccup kicked the solo flight glider into gear and took his left foot out of the position shifter. He turned himself around and faced the terrified O'Rourke, striking him lightly on the shoulder as he did so for amusement. Daniel rapidly adjusted every part of his body to keep his balance, and looked into the angry eyes of Hiccup with fear and bewilderment.

"Okay Daniel, we're going to play a little game I like to call living. You have to give me one good reason why I shouldn't kick you and the rest of your Celtic friends off this island or better yet kill each and every one of you, and in exchange I won't throw you off this here Night Fury. Deal?"

Hiccup patted Toothless with confidence. The dragon kept his eyes forward, preferring to not bother with the intense situation on his back and revel in the joy he got from soaring almost solo. O'Rourke wondered what he had done to warrant being put in such strenuous circumstances.

"Iâ€¦I don'tâ€¦..what's going on? What's happened?"

Hiccup knew he was letting his rage getting ahead of himself, and found the rational and more diplomatic side of his mind was finally recovering from the wound it had suffered a short while ago. He sighed amidst the cool afternoon air and proceeded to explain.

"Your Bishop, O'Neill, has insulted me. I want vengeance." Hiccup trailed off as he quickly realized the aggression he was expressing. It feltâ€|wrong. He had never truly experienced rage like this before, the power that coursed through his blood. It felt different-weird. He knew he was not himself, but there was something to be said about losing oneself, as long as you remember where you last were. O'Rourke continued to press questions, still wondering why he was in the position he was in.

"What did he do?"

Hiccup merely gave the deacon a glance and turned himself back around, clicking his left foot back into the pedal stirrup.

"Come on Toothless, I want to show him something."

The dragon was disheartened that his brief taste of freedom was cut short, but banked right slowly, O'Rourke still tightly gripped Hiccup, fearful of what lay ahead but growing more comfortable with his circumstances. The rush of wind around him was no longer as terrifying as it had been before, it started to sooth the hot blood that brought adrenaline through his body. The sun, at its midday strength warmed him as the Night Fury pulled he and Hiccup out in front of the village, where O'Rourke marveled at seeing his foster home covered by his palm. The Night Fury began to soar straight again. Hiccup did not set the dragon to solo flight, and instead only turned his head to address the deacon. He pointed to a large statue that O'Rourke had noticed watched over the entire village. He hadn't paid much attention to it so far, but was marveled in the air of how large it truly was.

"That statue that looks over the villageâ€|is of my father."

O'Rourke feared he knew where the conversation was going, and decided to keep quiet to let Hiccup continue his words.

"O'Neillâ€|has insulted my father, and consequently me." A pause came over Hiccup as he looked at the statue with admiration and a resurgence in his fury. "I want to hurt him for it."

O'Rourke was cautious of what to do, feeling a great sense of wounded pride and anger emanating of the dragon rider. "Do I still have to give a reason for me to live?"

Hiccup smiled at the wit of the Irishman, and regained his composure.

"O'Rourke, do you know what it's like to lead?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Do you know what it's like to have every person around you look up to you for guidance, for help, for wisdom? Do you know what it's like to be the savior of your people and not even want the title?"

"Iâ€|I really can't say I've ever been in such a position. I'm just a deacon, I have never been put in a position of leadership before." Hiccup appreciated the honesty of his guest, and continued.

"It's hard when you have to follow in the footsteps of someone like thatâ€¦" Hiccup gestured over to the statue of Stoick, which seemed to follow the two with its gaze wherever they flew. "It's hard when you try so hard to be like someone you've looked up to your entire life. When you have to lead the same people who were led by someone so much better than you, it'sâ€¦"

Hiccup trailed off again, keeping a close eye on the village from his omnipotent seat above.

"How do follow him?"

"Follow whom?" Daniel was unsure of the question as he noticed the silence of his pilot.

"How do end up following a man like O'Neill?" O'Rourke was struck by the question, having never quite considered it on the terms Hiccup implied. "You're a good man O'Rourke." Hiccup sighed, knowing for the first time since their arrival he had given a compliment to one of the Irish. "I don't see how a good man could ever follow such aâ€¦" Hiccup tapered off, mumbling the worst obscenities he could under his breath, words O'Rourke was glad to have never bothered to learn. He needed a response- and a good one- soon, a nagging fear at the back of his mind that Hiccup still intended to let him fall from the Night Fury to the ocean below.

"Sometimesâ€¦"

Hiccup looked back at O'Rourke again, having finished every insult he knew and letting them curse the wind.

"Sometimesâ€¦bad men get what they don't deserve. And sometimes good men suffer what they don't deserve."

"And how do you go through life knowing this is reality?" Hiccup didn't usually like to partake in philosophy, but he needed a calm subject to finally relive himself of his inner violence.

"God has a plan for us all, my chief. What that is, we cannot know, but all is righted in the end, it always is." While Hiccup did not appreciate the faith of the Irish being pushed in his face again, he internally conceded the validity of O'Rourke's point. The gods would right everything in the end, whether that would involve some violent fate befalling O'Neill would have to be decided later. But Hiccup felt calmer, and certainly more at ease than he had been. The Irish had a way with words, he could admit that.

"So, you ready to go down?"

"Well...only if it doesn't involve falling."

Hiccup merely kept his eyes forward and smiled. O'Rourke smiled too, if only at the feeling of descending from the heavens for the first time in his life.

* * *

><p>Hiccup waved goodnight to his mother as he and Astrid retired to their bedroom for the evening, his mother giving them a grin as the door closed behind them. Two candles slowly burned on opposite sides

of the bed, the light of the unobstructed moon shone through a window to make it more than possible for the two to see each other amidst the darkness of the late hour. Though they had entered in silence, Astrid was quick to break it as Hiccup began removing his armor.<p>

"So what are you going to do?"

Hiccup looked at Astrid as she began making herself ready for bed, she seemed to ask the question as though it was of little consequence, though it weighed heavily on Hiccup's conscious. He sighed at his unwillingness to make up his mind.

"I don't know."

Hiccup unstrapped his torso plate and placed it in the poorly organized pile of his discarded armor. He continued to feel the rage as fresh as it had been when it first sprung from him earlier that day, though he had managed to let it simmer in Astrid's presence. The last thing he wanted was to anger his wife in the midst of all this chaos. What was he going to do? The question had been on his mind since his less than docile ride with O'Rourke.

"What do you think I should do?" It wasn't uncommon at all for Hiccup to ask Astrid for her input, which he highly valued. But Astrid did not feel herself in the right state of mind to formulate any kind of meaningful response, and so she turned the question back to her husband. She walked close to him, placing a hand on his bare chest and bringing her face close to his, divided by a beam of moonlight.

"I want you to do what your heart wants to do."

"And just what does that mean?"

Hiccup could see through Astrid's desire not to give direct advice at the time and only smiled into the shadows that streaked across her face. Astrid knew the game her husband wanted to play and decided to press onwards, keeping a serious tone about her.

"I want you to do what you feel is right."

Though Astrid intended for her words to be simple, they were difficult for Hiccup to process. He felt the urge to see O'Neill's head mounted on a spear. At the same time, he did not want to make that what he was known for. He was Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, the diplomat, the negotiator. He had brought peace between dragons and Vikings, surely he was better than to let one insult tarnish his character. He hoped. Astrid led him over to the bed and sat him down, wanting to quickly console her husband and the torn mind she knew he had from the day.

"How do I know what I feel is right?"

Astrid was not one who enjoyed intellectual debate when so close to the warm embrace of her husband in the night, and hoped her new statement would drive the discussion closer to an end.

"Wellâ€¦what would your father do?"

Hiccup considered this a moment. Had Stoick's father been insulted, what would he have done? What would he have done if Irishmen had washed up on his shores one day? He would have welcomed the strangers, much like Hiccup. And he would have been suspicious of them, much like Hiccup. And then his father would have been insulted, and he would have wanted to kill them, just like Hiccup. His eyes widened with the realization. He had become very much like his father over this past year, a fact that gave him both joy, and frustration. Astrid could see the troubled expression on Hiccup's face through the moonlight, and moved to change his train of thought, being beaten by Hiccup just a moment too late.

"My father would want to stick with the old ways. The Viking way."

"Just like how he stuck with the Viking policy towards dragons?"

Astrid smiled at the wit of her remark, and Hiccup couldn't help but join her. His father, despite being close-minded, was not close-minded to being open minded. He had changed his father, and everything had worked out for the better, mostly. Still, Hiccup felt unsure of how he wanted to act. He could live up to his father's reputation, or his father's legacy, but not both. He turned to Astrid again for guidance.

"Astrid, be honest with me. Should I throw them out after the ceremony?" Hiccup's voice was soft against the night air, more so a whisper than a question. Astrid knew she finally had to give a direct answer to her husband, and formulated one.

"Wellâ€¦I guess you could. I meanâ€¦.what about O'Rourke? He's nice enough." Hiccup was surprised to hear such a defense of an Irishman come from Astrid, and began to query her.

"What do you mean? Hold O'Rourke captive here? What would the Irish say about that when they get home? That Berk is holding one of their own prisoner? We could have a war on our hands."

"You could convince him to stay. Convince him to stay on Berk and reject the rest of the Irish."

"Yeahâ€¦except we'd still have a Christian here. And I don't think it would be easy to convince Daniel to reject his faith."

Astrid paused a moment, her immediate response was stymied by her encounter with the deacon earlier in the day.

"Wellâ€¦."

Astrid's tapered off remark caught Hiccup off guard. Astrid knew she had dug herself into a hole that the only way out of was to dig through it.

"Astridâ€¦you can't be serious." Astrid looked to her husband through the candlelight near them and made sure to phrase her words carefully.

"Hiccupâ€¦you've heard what O'Rourke's said about his faith. It's everywhere. If it's in Ireland and Scotland, then it's already

established not too far away from us." Astrid paused a moment to phrase her next sentence. Hiccup was in awe of what he was hearing from Astrid, the most Viking-like Viking he had ever known.

"It's only a matter of time Hiccup. Like it or notâ€¦we're not gonna be able to fight this forever. Before you know it there's gonna be more Irishmen, and Scotsmen, and Saxons all coming here, and they're all going to want to trade both goods and ideas. And one of those will be this faith. It may be safer toâ€¦experimentâ€¦with it now with only a few of them present than to risk a real effort or worse an invasion of them in the future."

Astrid's words struck Hiccup at his core. His wife, Astrid Hofferson Haddock, was actually advocating for the Irish.

"Astrid, are you listening to yourself?" Astrid could sense the shock in Hiccup's tone, and the worry he held at the back of his throat.

"Hiccup, I'm not saying we should just embrace it outright. I'm just sayingâ€¦give it a chance is all. We're not going to be able to outrun this for long."

"And so we let O'Neill stay and preach? Let him condemn us at every turn?" The very thought of the Bishop was enough to bring anger into Hiccup's voice. He did not like to become angry with Astrid and found it uncomfortable for both of them, but couldn't help himself, his mind awash in too many emotions to organize. Astrid brought herself close to her husband in an effort to console him.

"You just let me take care of that my big tough Viking." She pressed her lips against Hiccup's and the two fell back upon the bed. Hiccup allowed the typical euphoria that accompanied such a moment to quell the many thoughts that racked his brain. What Astrid meant by her last comment, he did not know. He only knew that she now lay on top of him, and that the problems of the world could wait till morning.

* * *

><p>O'Gara had tried all day to hold his tongue against O'Neill, but found the comfort of the night and a few cups of ale weakened his resolve to the point where he found himself lashing out with all the aggression he could mobilize against his leader.<p>

"And furthermore, you dare think that after all you've done we still have a chance of winning converts? You idiotic old man!"

O'Neill sat in a chair at the back of the warehouse and allowed Luke to verbally assault him. The other three knights lay on their crude mattresses of hay, looking on in amusement as O'Gara lashed out in a mix of Gaelic and Norse.

"You couldn't just leave well enough alone! You touched the Night Fury for Christ's sakes!" O'Gara made the sign of the cross over himself and looked up to heaven before returning to his diatribe.

"Why can't you just accept the possibility, the ideaâ€¦the very notion, that this village and its dragons are not what you think them

to be! You fool! He could have us killed at daybreak for the way you insulted him! Idiot!"

O'Gara kicked a cup over to a wall and growled in his frustration. O'Conner, nearby where the cup had struck the wall sat up and moved to enter the oral fray.

"Was it not you who said we should try to convert them in the first place? Was it not you who advocated we should try and make the best of our time here?"

"The best use of our time does not mean insulting our host and probably turning the entire village against us you thick headed-! God!"

O'Gara kept an eye on O'Conner, figuring he would lash out at him for his attitude. O'Gara didn't care, his frustration was going to be heard whether his comrades liked it or not. He was surprised that John kept his head down and did not lunge at him. O'Gara figured John would wait until morning, so then could he.

"Any efforts we made, whatever inroads we had going for us, the deal with Eret, all for naught! All because of you and your insane prejudices you stodgy imbecile!"

"Hey, at least you got a girlfriend out of it!"

"Shut up Matthew! What good have you done to help this situation along? Nothing! You're as useless now as you were when we found you two on the side of a roadâ€|rejected wandering scum!"

Matthew took offense to his past being brought up and stood, eager to confront the boisterous knight.

"You think just because your father didn't reject you that your all that? I'm just as much heir to my chiefdom as you, and a better man for it to!"

"Prove it you vagabond!"

O'Gara and Matthew locked into a wrestling melee, the worst of the Gaelic language being thrown at each other as they rolled on the stone floor, landing the occasional punch on each other but mostly proving to be a match for their respective opponent's strength. After a few minutes of this Mark and John pulled the two apart, hoping the physical exertion would have calmed the two down. O'Gara was quick to throw John's arms off of himself and reassumed a dignified pose, Matthew rolling back over his brother and sitting against the wall out of breath. The two looked at each other a moment and with their facial expressions agreed to an armistice for the night. O'Gara swiped the dust off himself and walked for a moment before returning to his tirade, albeit in a lower and more tired voice.

"One chance. We had one chance and we've blown it. I hope you're happy." O'Gara pointed to O'Neill, who still sat calmly in his chair, and who O'Gara could swear actually smiled throughout his accusations. O'Gara dismissed this as he looked towards the door with regret on his face.

"A pity. Their souls could go to heaven. Now condemned to hell

because of your ineptitude. Bastard."

The last word rolled off O'Gara's tongue with a confidence he had not expected, and caught the rest of the knights off guard. Did he really just say that? Even O'Neill was caught by the anger. For the first time that evening he stood, his pride wounded but his expression bristling with confidence. He walked towards O'Gara slowly, letting each footfall leave its echo on the warehouse.

"Luke, do you know what is special about Armenia?"

The odd question confused the knight, who turned puzzled towards the bishop.

"What?"

"Do you know what is special about Armenia?"

Dumbfounded by the random question, O'Gara took a tone of sarcasm.

"No, please tell me what is so special about Armenia, oh enlightened one."

"You see my childâ€¦" O'Neill took on a condescending tone at the knight's sarcasm. "Eternal Rome was not the first state to adopt our faith, but it was Armenia. A great king named Tiridates had locked up a Christian named Gregory in a dungeon for many years after learning he was the son of the man who killed Tiridates' father. Then one day Tiridates fell ill, and this Christian man cured him. Tiridates then accepted the word of God and made Armenia the first Christian state. It's a rather nice story.

O'Gara was more confused than before as to why O'Neill was bringing up Armenia to him at this time.

"Andâ€¦..what does this have to do with anything, Holy Father?"

O'Neill smiled at O'Gara and walked towards the doorway, all four knights eyeing him closely, fearing he was suffering from a sudden onset of madness.

"You see my child, my insolent childâ€¦in making ourselves the enemy we have in turn made new friends. Tiridates has locked us into his dungeon, but Gregory still runs free. The martyrdom of our stature will only serve to further proclaim our message. We need only wait for the King to fall ill."

While O'Gara was at first confused by the bishop's musings, he came to understand their meaning.

"Implying the king shall somehow fall ill Is God suddenly sending a plague to us?"

O'Neill could only smile as he turned back to face O'Gara, by now relaxed enough to consider the bishop's words as a sound statement. He moved towards him, the gilding of his robes radiating the moonlight that shone on him through the only window.

"God has a plan for all of us Luke, we shall see where we fit in that plan soon enough."

O'Gara smiled at the remark just for a moment before the bishop clocked him across the jaw, sending him to the ground amidst the shock of the impact.

"And don't ever talk to me that way again."

* * *

><p>Though Astrid was in fairly good spirits, she knew upon Hiccup's return that a solemn feeling would dwell over the village. Many were up early to begin the preparations for the ceremony; finishing the adornments on the statue, getting the food for the feast ready, and sprucing up the village to an unusual level of cleanliness for the occasion. Though many reminisced on their lost and beloved chieftain, they went about their work with good attitudes, thanks both to the rare burst of powerful sunlight that accompanied the dawn and the prospect of a good time following the remembrance. Valka had set about working on the cooking, and had told Astrid to relax for the day. While she was relieved at having another day off in such a short while, it left her wanting for something to fill her time before Hiccup would return from his flight and resume his moping and indecision. Astrid had let Stormfly take her morning flight solo, allowing Astrid a few precious hours of extra sleep she felt she deserved. She decided to take a walk through the village to at least view those at work to make her feel at least somewhat accomplished for the day. She did not get far before her thoughts were interrupted.<p>

"Astrid!" Helga and a few other women made their way to her with eager but cautious expressions, as though they brought the news of a battlefield death.

"Uhâ€|.yes Helga?"

The larger Viking woman stopped a few feet away from the chief's wife before giving a slight bow out of respect and began to speak.

"We heard about theâ€|incident yesterday. Is Hiccup alright?" Astrid figured it was only a matter of time before news of the exchange between Hiccup and O'Neill spread throughout the entire village. It appeared that less than a day was all it took considering the villages' small size and Gobber's big mouth.

"Yeah, yeah he's fine." Astrid was not in a mood to talk about her husband and his encounters with the Irish. His long series of questions and complaints last night had left Astrid drained, but she kept manner of decorum around the ladies, there was no need to upset them at this moment.

Helga kept her eyes down a moment as the other ladies looked to her for guidance. Astrid was curious as to their other reasons for addressing her, figuring Hiccup was not after all the most of their worries.

"We've also heard you still have one of the Irishmen in your house." Astrid was surprised by the implication, as though there were something dirty about it.

"Yeahâ€¦|what about it?"

"Well, how is he doing?"

"Fine...I guess. Why?"

Astrid was surprised by the ladies sudden interest in O'Rourke, as if he had done something great to enamor the women to him.

"Do you know where he is now?"

Astrid became worried that the women were going to seek their vengeance for the insult of their chief on the young and weak deacon, and she held back information for the moment, not wanting to be responsible for a lynching on such a solemn day.

"Why do you ask?"

"Wellâ€¦|" Helga broke off her train of thought a moment, seemingly embarrassed to talk. The rest of the ladies kept quiet, looking to their leader for support. Helga got closer to Astrid and the two got within whispering range. Astrid knew whatever the reason, the ladies wanted to keep it a secret. "We were wondering if you did becauseâ€¦|weâ€¦|"

"What?"

"We want to see him. And we want to listen."

Astrid had heard Hiccup specialize amongst his many complaints about the Irish of how he knew some of the women were fascinated by them. Given how word of the insult handed out by O'Neill and his entourage had quickly spread, it was only logical that the only one left for the ladies to wet their imaginations over was O'Rourke. Astrid was torn. She figured O'Rourke would be somewhere in the mountain mint fields again, but did she really want to lead these women to him? He was already shy enough around her for whatever reasons; gods know how he'll react amidst a swarm of women. Did she really want to risk spoiling the special day all to entertain a few lonely wives and daughters? What would Hiccup think?

"Why?" Astrid was genuinely curious in the sudden interest these women seemed to have a foreigner of the same blood and faith as a man like O'Neill.

"Well some of us areâ€¦|oh godsâ€¦|.interested in what his people have to say. We overheard him a few times talking with some of the others, and we just want to find out more about him."

Astrid was taken with shock at what she was witnessing. Vikings were actually interested in the Irish. Then again, Astrid knew if they could adjust to dragons, certainly it was plausible for them to take an interest in something far less dangerous and fire blowing. Perhaps just for an hour, just a little while she could indulge them. After all, it would maybe give her a chance to listen to that Psalm again, the ancient words sticking with her longer than she had intended.

"Follow me."

"Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not witherâ€"whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction."

O'Rourke relaxed back into the mountain mint, letting the aroma of the crushed plants soothe his senses. Whenever he went back to Ireland he would have to bring some of this with him and plant it.

"Better than incense." He mumbled to himself. He let the sweet fresh smell and the words he had read flow over his body, the euphoria carrying him somewhere away up to the clouds in bliss. His mind was settled and at peace. The word of God was carried within his heart.

Astrid.

His brief calm was shaken by his change of thoughts.

"Stop it!" He clenched a fist in frustration as his bliss changed from one of relaxation to bodily passion.

"Sinner." It was all he could bring himself to say as he clenched his cross tightly on his chest. Why now, in the midst of bliss did he find himself having to break commandments? He closed his eyes and tried to make himself think of something different.

"Hail Mary, full of the grace, the Lord is with _Astrid._"

O'Rourke shook his head in frustration and kicked forward into the grass.

"Get a hold of yourself. Sinner"

He sighed as he let his mind wander back and forth between attempts at prayer and a blonde Viking wife, his heart in the throes of joy and pain. He could hear a short ways away what he thought to be footsteps, many footsteps crunching the grass underfoot.

"Daniel?"

Astrid. Not now. Please God not now. What could she want, and who was with her? O'Rourke sat up to make himself reluctantly visible and saw Astrid standing in front of six other women, who alit with curiosity at seeing him rise from the sweet smelling grass.

"Daniel, there you are!"

"Astrid. Astrid. Hi Astridâ€"hi Astridâ€"hello Astrid." O'Rourke mumbled a curse upon himself in Gaelic as Astrid merely shook off the weird greeting and motioned for the pack of women to close in, which

they did with curiosity and vigor. O'Rourke kept a stiff figure as they approached, much like Astrid had anticipated.

"He speaks Norse right?"

"What's it like in Ireland?"

"Where did you get your robes?"

"What's in the book?"

The rest of the women looked at Helga as she asked the question, puzzled as to the more serious tone of it. Astrid made her way over to the group at a leisurely pace and replied.

"Yes he does. Wet and Rainy. Nobody cares. Prayers."

The women turned to Astrid, impressed with her knowledge of the item of their affections. They then looked back to the deacon, still apprehensive about being so close to so many women.

"What kind of prayers?"

"Why do you believe in only one God?"

"Is it true what they say about the great warrior?"

"Enough!" Astrid's raised voice was enough to still the racing hearts and minds of the throng. "Let him speak for himself."

O'Rourke took a moment to appreciate the silence that befell the women and composed his fortitude.

"Wellâ€¦" His soft and enthralling Irish accent hung heavily on his Norse in a manner that only served to further entrance the Viking ladies. "I guess I'll start with that we only believe in one God, the father, the almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth, of all that is seen and unseenâ€¦." O'Rourke caught himself from fully reciting the creed in full tried to keep his statements brief. "The warrior, the one I know you've heard rumors about, is not who you think him to be."

"The great dragon killer?" One of the women proclaimed.

"No. No, Jesus was not a killer, or a warrior. He was instead the son of God, and infused with the Holy Spirit. He came down to Earth to forgive us our sins, and to show us the path to righteousness and from there, Heaven." O'Rourke looked up to the sky for dramatic effect, feeling an odd sense of confidence and strength come over him amidst the warm sunlight and intoxicating aroma of mountain mint.

"So God laid with a woman, and so infused his son with divine powers?"

"Wellâ€¦uhâ€¦.no." O'Rourke knew to keep his explanations simple for the Vikings, not wanting to overwhelm them with the complexities of divine mysteries. "You see, Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary, and was conceived by the Holy Spiritâ€¦"

"I thought it was God." A clamor of agreement came up from the crowd at the statement as they felt the deacon was contradicting himself.

"Wellâ€|yes and no. You seeâ€|" O'Rourke looked down to the grass below him. He could see, just sprouting up from the ground a few leaves of clover that desperately clung to life amidst the high and dominating mountain min that grew around it. Remembering stories of his homeland, he leaned over to pick it up, plucking it from the ground gently as the Vikings looked on in curiosity.

"You see, our faith is much like this clover." He held up the plant for the Vikings to see. "At the top is God, at his right and left, there is his Son and the Holy Spirit. They are all different branches of this clover, but all of the same plant. They are three separate parts of the same whole. No one holds dominance over the other. Anyways, it was the Holy Spirit, the will of God that led to Mary's impregnation with Jesus. And so the third part of this trinity was made flesh, fulfilling the scriptures of prophecy that foretold of the coming of a savior"

While the Vikings took a moment to absorb the words of O'Rourke, they did soon sink in. All were held captive by the words of the deacon, and they urged him onward.

"A savior?"

"What kind"

"What scriptures were these?"

"What did he look like?"

"Where was he born?"

O'Rourke found himself being overrun with questions, and Astrid could see this on the deacon's face.

"Okay, okay! Relax ladies. There will be time soon enough for the deacon to answer your questions." She moved between the deacon and the Viking ladies. "You know where he can be found, now get back to your work, this ceremony isn't going to happen all by itself!"

The Vikings were disheartened that their brief interlude with their object of fascination was cut short, but accepted the will of the chief's wife and turned back towards the village, whispering and giggling to themselves as they walked away. Astrid turned back to the relieved but cautious O'Rourke.

"Women, they can get a little obsessed with things at times." Astrid smiled at Daniel, who could only manage "Yeah." with a weak tone as a response. He kept an eye on Astrid, per her request as the two kept their silence a moment before Daniel, in a moment where he knew he wasn't thinking, extended his arm towards Astrid, bearing in its open palm the clover he had used.

"Here, no point in letting it go unused." Astrid accepted the paltry gift as she summed up the Irishman again. Certainly still awkward and shy, but seeming to brim with a power she could not quite place. She took the clover and slipped it into her jacket, the dark green

standing out against the white fur.

"Thanks." Astrid turned away and smiled, knowing she should let Daniel be alone with his precious book. "I'll see you at the ceremony tonight I take it?"

"Only if I'm still allowed givenâ€¦.you knowâ€¦ the bishop's attitude." Astrid could only keep a passing glance on Daniel as she turned away.

"You're always welcome here deacon."

With these parting words Astrid turned and began heading back to the village, leaving O'Rourke in the quiet of the field. The deacon held the cross beneath his tunic, and looked back to his Bible, laying forgotten in the grass. O'Rourke picked up the heavy volume and made a glance towards Astrid's departing figure. He found himself wanting to compose a poem, a phrase, an expression to sum up his feelings.

"Sinner" was all he could come up with.

6. Poison

***"There are poisons that blind you, and poisons that open your eyes."-August Strindberg**

* * *

><p>The twilight of the warm day passed into the cool of a Nordic evening as torches quietly lit the island of Berk in a welcoming glow. The village had turned out in full for the ceremony, but they maintained an air of remorse for the time being as they shuffled to the benches assembled for the event near the base of Stoick's statue. Its massive height left its face difficult to see from the ground, though this was not supposed to be the center of attention this evening. The multitudes took their seats and stared only at the feet of the memorial to their past leader. Hiccup stood at the back, accepting condolences, small gifts and welcoming the village as night embraced the island in its grip. Fog rolled off the island's sides and through the outskirts of town, a silence not usually experienced at this hour held onto the mouths of the villagers, all anxious to get through the ceremony and onto the celebration of memory that was to come afterwards. Astrid, having taken time to put on her most formal attire arrived amidst the last of the villagers along with Valka, their dragons behind them. Toothless, though usually happy to see the other dragons, was caught up in the solemnity of the occasion, and kept a stoic visage before them in the same vain as his master.<p>

"Good luck up there." Astrid gave her husband a hug as she whispered the words into Hiccup's ear. Hiccup could not manage any response accept a mumble which Astrid took to mean "thanks."

Hiccup looked to Valka, who only bowed to her son and chief in respect before walking towards the front, Cloudjumper taking to the skies and perching on top of a house to get a good look at the goings on, Stormfly doing the same. Hiccup could only sigh and look down at Toothless, the Night Fury looking up to him in anticipation knowing

something big was about to occur. Hiccup looked to the benches before him, and the empty but illuminated platform where he was to speak and give sacrifice. All seemed to be in their seats, it was show time.

A gilded robe caught the corner of Hiccup's eye through the darkness, and he turned dismayed to see O'Neill and the four knights walking with confidence in their step but reverence for the occasion towards him. Toothless presented himself to the guests with irritation and growled at the Irishmen, the sound instilling some caution in the group, but not enough to turn them around.

"Toothlessâ€¦easy." Hiccup calmed the dragon with hand on its head and looked with frustration at the five Celts who approached him, daring to spoil the moment with their presence.

"What do you want?" Hiccup let out quickly and with daggers in his voice, not looking forward to dealing with the Gaels at the moment. O'Neill stopped, the knights doing likewise and motioned to O'Gara, who accepted now was the time to speak the Norse prepared for him earlier in the day. He bowed in respect to the chief and in fear to the Night Fury.

"Chief Hiccup, my Bishop would like to apologize for his actions yesterday, and wishes for your grace so that we may merely observe this solemn occasion out of our dearest sympathies for your loss and our hopes of reconciliation at your discretion."

The words, at least to Luke seemed to fall on deaf ears as Hiccup maintained a face of frustration at the Irish presence. Still, his knowledge of where he was made him consider the offer. While he held none of them in any higher regard, now was not the time to make a scene and cast them back to their warehouse, not with such an air of sanctity upon the early night. He looked to Toothless, who could only keep his gaze planted on O'Neill with a lust for blood, a feeling which despite outward appearances of confidence kept the bishop's adrenaline pumping violently.

"Fine." The blunt words would sum up Hiccup's thoughts on the matter. "There's a small bench right there, sit there and stay quiet. Disturb the ceremony andâ€¦". Hiccup looked again to Toothless, the implications of the simple gesture enough to earn a quick response from O'Gara.

"Deal. Thank you Chief Hiccup, we are blessed at yourâ€¦"

"Shut up and sit down."

With these harsh words Hiccup turned towards the stage, Toothless behind him. The Irish quickly made their way to the small bench at the very back, looked at by more than a few villagers with disrespect and contempt.

"Well this is a less than comfortable situation." O'Gara sighed as he managed to get a spot next to O'Neill, forcing O'Conner to take a seat on the grass with no room left for him on the bench.

"Yes, but discomfort does not mean bad now does it?" O'Neill merely kept his eyes to the stage as he mumbled his response. O'Gara did the same, noticing how near the front a figure in black was making his way out of the woods and towards the front row.

O'Rourke nearly tripped over his feet as he made his way to the seats reserved for Hiccup's family. Hiccup had just passed and had made his way to the side of the stage, and waited with irritation as the sly Irishman made sure to make space between Valka and Snotlout, denying himself the pleasure of the space next to Astrid. _Out of sight, out of mind._ Valka had no qualms about making some space for the guest, Snotlout merely eyed him with disgust and anger, caring not for whatever set O'Rourke apart from the other Irishmen. They were all Celts, and Celts had insulted the chief, thus all Celts were bad.

Hiccup, at seeing all were now in their right places, motioned for Toothless to leave his side to begin the ceremony. The Night Fury complied and found his way to Astrid and Valka, lying down in front of them and curling himself up to rest, his tail nearly resting on O'Rourke's feet.

"You scared Irishman?" Snotlout whispered into Daniel's ear with venom. O'Rourke merely looked at the dark mass by his feet, the unholy offspring of lightning and death resting like a kitten, its hide seeming to fade in and out of the darkness with the flickering of the torches. Memories aside, it was a magnificent creature. He made sure to keep his head equal to Valka's torso, using it to block the Astrid's golden braids amidst the flickering torchlight.

"Get a hold of yourself." Daniel mumbled to himself.

"What?" Valka asked, thinking the deacon had said something inquisitive.

"Uhâ€¦nothing." O'Rourke eyed the stage.

Focus damn you.

Hiccup took the stage alone, the thud of his metal leg against the wood putting to rest the final murmurs in the audience. They looked up to their current chief beneath the aura of a fallen one and waited, preparing for the worst the tortured Viking soul had to offer.

"People of Berk." Hiccup's voice was for the moment brimming with the joys of controlling so many people, though he knew in the back of his mind his façade would falter at some point in the evening. "People of Berk, your Chief thanks you all for coming out this evening. We are all here for one reason, and that is to celebrate the memory of one man, a good man, a manâ€¦we all looked up to."

Hiccup broke off a moment and a cheer from the crowd ensued. He looked to Valka for support, finding enough of it in the oceans of her eyes to continue. Valka knew this was hard for her son, who had known his father longer than she had known her husband. She recalled their brief time together with only fondness, having detached herself enough from Stoick once had granted her the blessing and curse of being able to do so again.

"This past year has been difficultâ€¦for all of us. We have faced down the enemy at our doors, harsh seas through these past few months; and we have endured a milder summer than usual, not that I'm complaining!" He let the joke elicit some relief from the audience

before resuming. "But this past year has had its blessings as well. We have had a good harvest, we have lived well, we have laughed well, and we have loved well."

Hiccup peeked an eye to Astrid as a few women in the crowd made their knowledge of his reference known. Daniel tried to keep his head down but couldn't help but manage a glance at her. She seemed to maintain the same stone face as the other Vikings, though her insides were lifted in the joy of her acknowledgment. She saw on the stage her husband, a few years ago an awkward boy now the man which completed her.

"But none of this would be possible, nor even conceivable without those that came before me. To someone like him, like my father." Hiccup gestured behind him and upwards into the night to the statue that rose above him. "We all miss him, some more than others." Hiccup could feel the emotions swirling at the back of his throat and eyes, but pressed onwards.

"I know that but six years ago I wasn't exactly the most popular around here, and certainly not to him. But times change, and so do people. Both myself, and my father, and all of us." He gestured to the crowd who rallied in encouragement. O'Neill and his retinue could only look on in entertainment at the delightfully emotional experience they were witness to.

"They are!" Hiccup motioned to Toothless, who remained curled up in rest below the stage. "They are proof of this. The dragons are proof that all men can change. They are proof that we don't have to linger on the past, that we can move forward with life, to new and better beginnings." Toothless batted an ear at Hiccup, encouraging him on amidst his lack of desire to be very mobile, Hiccup's morning flight having effectively worn him out for the day. "Dragons represent for us the future, and that future could not have been made possible without him." Hiccup motioned back to the statue again. The crowd roared in agreement. O'Gara, the shadows of night concealing him leaned over to O'Neill in the sudden burst of noise.

"Well he certainly has the right idea." O'Neill merely managed a faint smile at the knight as the two turned back to look at Hiccup who continued his speech.

"And that is why we are here tonight. We are here not to linger, not to wallow, nor bemoan or cry, but to move on. We must with time move on from the darkness of the past, to move on from the memories that stain our dreams, from that which we'd rather have never happened."

Hiccup looked back to Toothless, visions of his best friend kneeling to another Alpha, and the panic that had set in Hiccup's heart on the field of battle rushed through his blood. His memory was one he could not erase forever, it was one he knew would be with him till his death, still waking him up at an ungodly hour. O'Rourke kept his view on Hiccup, managing a glance at Toothless who purred at his feet. A boyhood fear rose and subsided at the back of his throat, stories told to him by monks who now lay beneath the Earth rushed in and out of his conscious thoughts.

"My father—he would not want to see us cry, to shame ourselves for his death, but to commemorate, to celebrate, to hold his memory close

to us. As he sits in the hall of Valhalla" Hiccup stopped a moment to catch himself from shedding a tear, knowing he was too close to the end now to break his easily dismissible façade of strength. "We shall remain here in Midgard, eagerly awaiting the time when we may join him!" Hiccup's voiced cracked under his emotional strain, though it went unnoticed by most as the crowd raised their fists and cheered in agreement.

Astrid couldn't help but shed a tear of her own amidst Valka's company, knowing the heartache of her husband all too well. She looked at Toothless, as comfortable as ever. She knew their friendship was the strongest she had ever seen, yet she wondered how Hiccup dealt with it. Everyday riding on the back of that which had killed his father had to be awkward in some way. She wasn't sure if she could have done the same, and she was left only to ponder the mysteries of their bond.

Hiccup, knowing the appropriate time had come motioned offstage to Gothi and Gobber, who escorted onto the stage a yak of ideal age and build. The crowd cheered fanatically, in a gesture that began to worry the Irish. The group looked at each other in collective realization and interest.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" O'Gara inquired O'Neill.

"I don't think, I see."

Gobber presented above his head a small statue, dwarfed by the one of Stoick behind it but held in higher reverence by the Vikings, no matter how much they loved their former chief. The yak idled on the stage, oblivious to its fate. Gothi, with each small footstep set about the intricacies of the ritual, anointing the yak with a wreath of flowers and crushing a stem of mountain mint into its forehead, Toothless purred at the slightest whiff of the noxious aroma. Gobber had set the statue down before the Vikings, who all remained silent in its presence. Hiccup knew it was time to get underway with things and called back the crowd's attention.

"Friends and people of Berk, we today here offer up this libation to Odin in his eternal honor. We offer this sacrifice in memory of Stoick, that it may be received by him in Valhalla and in doing so keep us in Odin's good graces. May it be acceptable to Odin and all the gods of Asgard, that they may continue to look down upon and smile with good fortune for this year and the many to come!"

The crowd roared again in agreement, O'Gara again using the opportunity to whisper to the bishop.

"Well they certainly have the means to redeem themselves given their fervor."

"Desire and will are two different things my child." O'Gara was confused by the cryptic answer, but chose not to respond as silence befell the gathering again.

Hiccup had pulled from beneath his ceremonial vestment his knife, freshly sharpened for the occasion. Gobber turned to the yak and embraced it with a tight grip, the presence of steel was hardly a welcome sight to the beast. Hiccup closed in on it, his least favorite part of the ceremony was upon him. He had a flashback to a

time six years ago where he had found a Night Fury in the woods, and how he realized he couldn't bring himself to kill it. He cast a look out to the audience who eagerly anticipated the sight of rich dark blood flowing in the still of the night. Hiccup caught a sighting of O'Neill, looking on in fascination with a smug look on his face. That bloodlust, that desire to kill that had not been with Hiccup six years ago was finally with him. Time did indeed change people.

"Hail Odin!"

"HAIL ODIN!"

Arose from the crowd as Hiccup closed in the blade, making a single deep and effective cut on the yak's neck as it writhed a moment in pain before it began to stumble downwards. Hiccup felt his face, where a slight squirt of the dark blood had fallen upon his cheek. Warm but cooling, Hiccup wasn't sure how to treat the event, and kept his hand away from it, not wanting to curse the sacrifice by disrespecting whatever the gods may have meant by such a sign. Gothi took the pan in her hand and placed it at the incision sight where the blood began to stream into the basin. Hiccup felt slightly nauseas of the sight. Despite being more than privy to his fair share of injuries and mishaps, the thought-the feeling- of willfully seizing the life of another creature and in such a personal manner did not sit well with him. He sometimes wondered what he would be like if had been a more aggressive person, one among his plethora of fantasies that played out in his mind throughout the day, but not one he could afford to tantalize himself with at the moment.

Gothi, seeing she had more than enough blood now for the occasion motioned to Hiccup, who approached and kneeled before the old woman, who merely gestured her hand at the pan. A brief connection of their eyes was enough to tell Hiccup his role, one Gothi had apparently not bothered to inform about. More than knowledgeable as to what had to be done, Hiccup seized the rag from the pan and held it loosely in his palm, the odd touch of an appendage covered in foreign blood was a less than pleasant one.

He stood, and carried the rag over to the idol Gobber had planted at the front of the stage. Standing above it, droplets of blood dripping from his hand, Hiccup looked out to the crowd, again catching O'Neill smiling at him. Hiccup crushed the rag in his fist as the blood fell upon the idol, the Vikings roaring with joy and calls of "Hail Odin!" The multitude stood and roared with applause and joy as the idol was decorated with blood.

O'Neill stood up, confounding the knights to whom he motioned to rise.

"What are you doing?" O'Gara questioned the bishop as he rose.

"Showing respect my child." O'Neill responded, paternalistic in his tone.

"But this is blasphemy!"

"These are blasphemous times. Hail Odin!"

The knights looked at each other a moment before rising and joining

in the calls, mumbling prayers under their breath after each volley of heresy. O'Gara looked towards the front, where O'Rourke also stood, but instead kept an air of decorum. Valka, amidst her rare outburst of religious passion looked towards the Irish guest and merely shook off the seemingly insulting gesture, understanding his desire not to commit blasphemy. Snotlout managed a light punch at Daniel's arm amidst an energetic display of religious loyalty, seeing the Irishman as a stain on the ceremony and an insult by his very presence. O'Rourke merely kept his head down and silently said his own prayer for the chief's father, to a different God but of like minded intention.

Hiccup let the last droplets of easily squeezable blood drip from the rag before carefully draping it over the statue, taking care not to disturb the holiness of the idol. He stood up amidst the cheers of the crowd, pride and a slight deal of awe overcoming his more pessimistic emotions as he outstretched his arms to the gathered masses.

"Let us feast tonight for honor! For memory! For Stoick!"

The crowd erupted into a final burst of hysterical joy as the dragons of the village, sensing the momentous nature of the occasion began in their own tribute, blasting their fire up into the sky and illuminating the village with the light of the blaze. Even Toothless, who mentally orchestrated the occasion brought himself out of his light doze to send up a bolt of plasma, a light blue hue emanating from his hide. O'Rourke was slightly frightened at the colorful display before it dissipated beneath the ebony hide of the Night Fury, now sitting upright in respect to his friend to the slight frustration of those sitting behind the front row. Not that this mattered, as Hiccup motioned them all to the Great Hall where they would soon feast for the second time in a week, only this time out of happiness rather than as formality. Hiccup dismounted the stage with a jump, Gobber accepting his responsibility to bring the yak to the slaughter house for tomorrow. Astrid and Valka rose to congratulate Hiccup on his respectable performance.

"Nicely said son." Valka said calmly, intent on heading to the Hall and seeing her day's labor appreciated. Astrid moved to embrace her husband and thank him for his kind implications, stopping short of his face as she noticed the blood spread across it. She smeared it with her hand and proceeded to kiss Hiccup passionately.

"Blood's not a good color for you." Hiccup could only smile at the relaxed comment, seeing into Astrid's eyes and seeing the emotions he felt a desire to repress given the magnitude of the occasion and his stature. Hiccup looked to O'Rourke, his head down and hands clutched around his bible by his side as always.

"Well don't look so sad Dan, we've got a celebration to get to." The deacon could only look up to the happy couple and managed.

"Then let us give thanks."

O'Neill and his retinue waited for the rest of the Vikings to proceed by them before trailing the group at a distance. The knights looked forward to a potential bounty of good food and drink again, and a chance to witness a true Viking celebration the likes they had heard about in brothels back in Ireland. O'Neill had abandoned his crosier

for the occasion, and instead he held in his pocket a small cloth bag of crushed plants he had picked that morning.

"Let us give thanks..." He whispered beneath his breath.

The Great Hall reverberated with the collective hollers and conversations of the Vikings as mead increasingly took over their conscious functioning. Many took collective turns pitching toasts to the memory of their former chief and commendations to their current one, often times connected by memories of the younger living in the massive shadow of the elder. Hiccup took each toast in stride, allowing the sometimes less than flattering words or drunkenly mumbled applause to slide off his ears without insult. This was as much a day for the rest of the village as it was for him. He allowed the rest to enjoy the festivities. It had been hard work pulling off two feasts in such rapid succession and he was sure there would have to be work done to keep the food stores in safe surplus, but it pleased him to see the village relaxed again.

Then of course there were the Irish. Though Hiccup did his best not to concern himself with them for the evening, the occasional passing glance at them continued to remind him of their unwanted presence, a presence which Hiccup knew frustrated the rest of the Vikings as much as he. O'Rourke sat next to Hiccup, the one welcome guest amongst the six. Quiet, head down and not drawing attention to himself, Hiccup could at least tolerate Daniel's bodily presence, though his spiritual one still irked him.

Astrid sat on his other side. Hiccup couldn't stop himself from thinking about what she had said to him the other night.

Like it or not we can't fight this forever.

He had never heard such a defeatist argument made by Astrid. His wife was enjoying Valka's company, exchanging an anecdote about Hiccup sneaking out from a punishment one night for an evening rendezvous with her.

Can't fight it forever.

The one line tore Hiccup apart. It represented everything he stood for and everything he stood against.

He had tamed a dragon, trained it, befriended it; changed three hundred years of Viking teachings in the course of a few weeks and at the cost of a leg. People could change, he was sure of it. Or he was. Then there was Drago. A man who could not be changed, who did not want to change. Arrogance, an inability to listen, to consider differently, it was everything Hiccup despised. And he wanted to be that. Every time he saw O'Neill it surged inside him. A hatred, an intolerance, a fear. Fear of change, fear of everything he had come to love about his home destroyed beneath the heel of an Irishman; a southerner of all peoples.

He was becoming his father. What did that make O'Rourke, himself? Was he supposed to let a sly, poorly built Celt undo the very dogmatic fabric that held his island together? He looked to O'Rourke, and he saw himself, and he did not like what he saw. He could only imagine what his father had really thought about Hiccup back when he was younger, before Toothless. It didn't please him to consider the

possibilities, to remember the father that looked down upon and condescended towards him in the way only a father can. Now he found himself in the same position, casting derision and distrust upon those that did not agree with what he considered appropriate custom. This is what it had been like to be his father, and Hiccup both reveled in and despised the idea; to be so alike and yet so distant, to be so similar and yet different.

Fishlegs had made a stand amidst several of his peers and raised his goblet in toast.

"Long live the Chief!"

"LONG LIVE THE CHIEF!"

The hall erupted in celebration as Hiccup raised his own tankard in thanks. Long live the chief, a noble thought.

* * *

><p>"I don't think I've even seen an Ulsterman ingest so much ale."<p>

"You know I heard our Uncle has a claim to Ulster, perhaps when we return we could help him capture it."

"Sounds like a plan."

Matthew and Mark continued their ever new and adventurous plans for finding their way to power with amusement and fantastical optimism as O'Gara kept his eyes searching around the Great Hall. Though they had mostly been left alone at their own small table, all the Irish still maintained their guard amidst the increasingly intoxicated Vikings, knowing that eventually something had to happen. They weren't sure what, but something. Life is after all an eventful process.

"You know maybe if we get them drunk enough they'd be willing to convert, that's how it worked for my great-great-great-great grandfather."

O'Gara did not bother to address the lunacy of John's idea, knowing it was better not to confront the behemoth of a man with so much mead in his system. Even if Luke knew it meant he could take him easily it would be too much effort to get up. He still nursed his first tankard of mead, and watered down mead at that. O'Neill was doing the same, the brothers and John not taking such care in maintaining a sobriety necessary to defend themselves. Even so, they had merely the knives supplied for them to cut their meat, nothing of substance in the event of a true battle. Would there be battle? O'Gara tried to push the thought out of his mind. He was still certain it was only a matter of time before Hiccup had them executed for O'Neill's insult. To be killed here, on foreign shores by heathens was an unpleasant thought, though it was at least a fate a soldier of God could boast about to St. Peter. O'Gara occasionally kept an eye on Hiccup, who only seemed to enjoy the sight of his village in revelry, not actively partaking in it.

A group of musicians struck up a song, the roar of pipes and delicate strumming of harps just enough to slightly overpower the echoes of the hall. So many of the other knights had loved the sound of pipes,

O'Gara hated them. And yet the rest of them now lay at the bottom of the North Sea and he lived on. Sad. Luke looked into his tankard, the mead dark and gently rocking back and forth in the container. Good men taken by God too soon, and O'Gara lived on. So did O'Neill, the Hennessey's, O'Conner and O'Rourke. Why? What made them special? O'Gara could only accept that God had a plan for them all, a phrase that managed to console him time and time again during the ordeal.

A figure that rose from a nearby table caught the eye of O'Gara and O'Neill. Eret, son of Eret was moving to get more mead out of a large barrel. Luke looked to the bishop, having a bad feeling about the grin on his face.

"Eret! Son of Eret, over here!" The Bishop's Irish accent was lost amidst the din of the hall, merely the words being caught on the ears of Eret, son of Eret who turned with frustration to see the bishop beckoning him over to the table. He walked over slowly, a less than pleased look upon his face.

"What?" The harsh Norse tone drew the attention of Matthew, Mark and John, oblivious to the words but sensing tension in the impending conversation.

"I just wanted to talk to you about our little deal, considering how I assume your little lady issue has been settled. I figured we'd start your lessons and training tomorrow evening if youâ€œ"

"Piss off." Eret, son of Eret threw the remaining ounce of mead in his own tankard into the bishop's face before walking away. The three drunken knights could only laugh at the insult to the bishop. O'Gara joined them only with a smile as the bishop's pride seemed not to shift as he wiped the alcohol off his face.

"Any more bright ideas father?" O'Gara managed to let some sarcasm role into his voice as he posed the question. O'Neill felt within his robes to a small cloth packet, the still fresh and moist plants he had picked that morning rolling between his fingers.

"That was only the auxiliary plan my child, the main plan is still afoot." O'Gara was curious at the implications of the odd phrasing. Auxiliary plan?

"What does that mean exactly?"

O'Neill smiled at the knight with a shadow of malevolence across his lips.

"Well you see I took a walk up the mountain today and I couldn't help but notice an abundance ofâ€œ"

O'Neill's statement was broken off as Ruffnut approached the table, seeming to follow in the exact footsteps of Eret, son of Eret. She approached O'Gara. An elbow to the side by Mark reminded Luke of his romantic obligations, which he begrudged to still take part in. Still he put on his most charmingly exotic Gaelic persona and welcomed the woman inwards. He mustered his best Norse pronunciation as she closed in.

"Good evening my dear, beautiful ceremony was itâ€œ" A punch across his jaw made O'Gara realize that he was getting into more physical

contact with other people on this island than he would have cared for.

"Ow." He rubbed the area as he brought his face back up to view Ruffnut, who proceeded to quickly close in and give the knight a passionate kiss before casting him aside and walking away. Luke was left confused and tasting fish as he turned back to his comrades.

"I will never understand Viking women."

"I don't think you understand women at all."

"Shut up Mark." O'Gara caressed the rather firm strike against his face, the second one in twenty four hours. He didn't like getting punched in the face, whether he deserved it or not. Recovering from his blow, he looked back to O'Neill who sipped calmly and lightly from his tankard after a slice of boar.

"Anyways, you were saying something about a mountain hike?" The bishop put his tankard down and smiled.

"Ah! Yes, well I was coming down from the mountain towards the afternoon when I noticed off a stretch of path there was an abundance of thick plant life. I was curious as to what grew in these Northern lands so I took a few moments to inspect them. It would turn out that this island is home to some very healthy varieties of nightâ€" "

"You!"

O'Gara and O'Neill looked up to address the booming Norse voice that addressed one of them. Snotlout, with an inebriated walk and frustrated grin was making his way over to the Irish table, his fierce address mostly unnoticed by the rest of the hall amidst the roar of pipes. He made his way to O'Gara, who looked inquisitively at the Viking before Snotlout gave him a fierce strike across the jaw. Some Vikings at nearby tables took a break from their celebration to notice the occasion. O'Gara was very much beginning to hate being punched in the jaw.

"You think you puny Irishmen can just come here andâ€|.andâ€|..and steal our ladies andâ€|.i â€|insult ourâ€|chief? Celtic bastards."

O'Gara, knowing full well the control over the situation his sobriety gave him kept a smug demeanor after recovering from another uncomfortable jaw strike.

"I don't know what you're talking about good sir, would you care to explain further?" The Irishman said in a breathy confidence. Snotlout, not drunk enough to misunderstand the sarcasm pushed on aggressively.

"Yeah you do youâ€|.Celtic bastard!" O'Gara looked to O'Neill and the two agreed in confidence on their control of the situation.

"Oh! Oh you mean the Thornston girl? Oh well yes she is quite a pleasant experience for me, not the best but adequate enough given her place of upbringing." O'Gara knew his confidence and whatever mead he had on board was responsible for that last part, but he

refused to apologize to a drunkard.

"Celtic bastard!" Snotlout swung again at O'Gara and missed, narrowly missing Mark instead; who merely ducked out of the way and let his Norse speaking brethren handle the situation.

"Challenge! Iâ€|challenge you!" Snotlout said just loud enough to be heard against the din of the music. The offer slightly surprised Luke, who kept a cautious eye on the Viking's arms in case another swing came at him.

"What?"

"Fight me! Forâ€|..Tuffâ€|noâ€|..Ruffnut!"

"He accepts." O'Neill got out before O'Gara could even fully register the threat posed towards him. He looked back at the bishop perplexed and slightly worried. O'Neill gave Luke a nod of confidence and the two looked back at the eager if intoxicated Snotlout.

"Time and place?" Luke managed with a return to his confident self.

"Now. Celticâ€|.Bastard. Outside!" Snotlout grabbed O'Gara by his tunic and hoisted him up, Luke braking away fast enough so as not to rouse the rest of the hall to the scene, not that it was of much help. As the two made their way towards the doors, they found Tuffnut waiting for them with two long-swords hidden behind his back as he leaned against the wall. As the other three knights followed well enough behind, Tuffnut opened the doors just enough for the group to make their way outside, seeming to support his friend in fighting to keep her sister enthralled in Viking blood, not the foreign contaminant that was the Irish seed.

* * *

><p>"And so eventually I had to jump off the cliff to get Toothless to understand that we had to fight the Whispering Death together. I'm fortunate enough he figured it out, if not a moment too soon." Hiccup looked over to Toothless, curled up behind him and tucking his ears beneath his wings amidst the whirling trance of the pipes.<p>

"Certainly one of his more daring feats." Astrid wrapped an arm around Hiccup as O'Rourke nodded at the chief, entertained by the story and intimidated by Astrid's sudden presence before him.

"Daring indeed." O'Rourke gestured his tankard, finally nearing emptiness after a single serving towards his host, visibly more relieved this evening than he had been past nights. Hiccup nudged the deacon lightly, a light buzz overcoming him.

"Come on O'Rourke, I'm not the only one with stories. What's the last interesting thing you've been through? Hiccup tired of talking, tired of thinking, tired of contemplating, tired of hating. He wanted to listen, he didn't care to whom, even an Irishman would do.

"Well uh back when we were travelling to Dublin weâ€"

"More my chief?" A serving girl came about the table, allowing O'Rourke to distract himself with another female face instead of the one pressed so close to his host.

"By Thor's beard why not! Another round for everyone!" The hall erupted in a cheer at the chief's loud proclamation, said just as soon as the pipe player had ended his tune. The serving girl went about pouring fresh mead into the cups as Hiccup noticed a crowd gathering outside the hall doors.

What the...?

"Chief Hiccup?"

Hiccup's hopes of being entertained were dashed as O'Neill approached the long table, putting on an air of concern and a desire for help. O'Rourke was less than pleased at seeing the object of his host's fury so close again, and feared that the end result might be himself on another dangerous flight on the back of Toothless.

"Bishop O'Neill, what do you want?" Hiccup was blunt in his tone and direct in his question, hoping to dismiss the bishop as soon as possible.

"Well my chief, it seems that one of your men has challenged one of my knights to a dual, and they have gone outside to do so. I would implore upon you to help in putting a stop to it; I would hate to see one my men or yours injured on this blessed night."

Hiccup, despite not wanting to have to took heed of O'Neill's warning. He looked around the hall, and noticed Snotlout was missing.

"Oh no." Astrid joined him at the same moment in collective realization. Hiccup knew he'd have to have a talk with his cousin about this afterwards, but right now he could only worry about stopping any real injury from taking place. Hiccup sighed.

"Toothless come on." Hiccup groaned as he got up from his comfortable seat, the dragon quickly taking his place by his side. Astrid and Valka quickly followed. O'Rourke wasn't sure whether to get involved in the matter, and looked to O'Neill who beckoned him on.

"We had best go support our countryman shall we?"

"I suppose." O'Rourke got up and rushed to catch up with the rest. O'Neill stayed a moment longer, squeezing some berries he had picked that morning and letting the juice drop into a freshly poured tankard of mead.

For the second time Snotlout attempted to rush O'Gara, who merely moved out of the way of the haphazard charge, brushing Snotlout's leg with the flat side of his sword as he did so. Such a move drew another wave of boos from the gathering crowd, not caring for the Irishman's taunts. O'Gara merely walked away knowing he had continued to irritate his challenger. He figured perhaps one burst of effort, one quick and decisive blow would be enough to satisfy all participants. He gestured his sword to his side, exposing himself to attack and mocking his opponent at the same time, eliciting a further

rush of condescension from the audience.

Snotlout, angered by the mockery of the Irishman charged a third time. O'Gara this time stood his ground and accepted the mighty blow from the long-sword with his own, acknowledging that while drunk, a Viking's strength was still not one to be underestimated. He then drew his sword close, bringing his body to within a hand's length of Snotlout before adjusting his sword and locking the hilt of his own with that of Snotlout before tugging fiercely on the sword, ripping it out from the Viking's hand. The momentum carried the Viking forward, only to have the same momentum pushed back against him as O'Gara slammed his sword pommel into Snotlout's abdomen, sending the drunk Viking onto his back. Luke threw the Viking's sword to the side and walked over the Viking, his own sword pointed to his challenger's distraught face as he placed a foot on Snotlout's ribs.

"Pleading for mercy would now be considered acceptable."

Before Snotlout could respond an ancient and blood curdling roar emanated from the entrance to the Great Hall. The crowd on the steps looked back in surprise and mild deal of shock as Toothless finished the screech. Hiccup stood to the side of the dragon, O'Neill slipping by him and making his way down the steps to the site of the duel.

"Enough!" Hiccup announced. Luke was quick to throw his own sword away and back off from Snotlout the moment he saw the chief, still seeking to be held at least somewhat in his host's good graces.

"Snotlout! Get up here!" Hiccup's cousin slowly got up after the shock of the recent blow to his pride and stomach and trudged his way up towards the chief, who viewed the entire scene and all who partook in it, Viking or Irish with contempt. He motioned for his cousin to get into the hall with the rest of the assembled Vikings, irritated that the night had been marred by such a basic Viking lust as physical combat.

"Chief Hiccup I'm terribly sorry about this, we'll leave you in peace for the rest of the night!" O'Neill exclaimed the words with an uncanny vigor. Hiccup merely turned his back on the bishop and retired back inside with Toothless and the rest as the doors close behind them. O'Rourke managed one last gaze at his countrymen as the large doors closed, wondering what truly separated him from the rest. As the quiet of the night separated the Vikings and the Irish once more, the other knights gathered around O'Gara.

"Nicely done there lad."

"A good performance as always."

"Vikings are too easy." Luke felt a great sense of pride within himself, even if he knew defeating an inebriated opponent was hardly a demonstration of his true combat skills. He saw O'Neill approaching them, and decided to inquire as to why the situation had taken place.

"Why exactly did you have me accept this challenge again, not that I'm complaining?"

"So that we may do God's work my child." Luke was frustrated with the ambiguity of the response.

"And just what is that supposed to mean this time?"

O'Neill gestured the knights to walk with him and they followed, eager to hear the bishop's response. As they withdrew out of the immediate sight of the hall, the bishop finally with a malevolent smile looked to O'Gara.

"Our guest enjoys his Night Fury. Let us see how he enjoys its Shade."

O'Gara's eyes opened with the realization. He looked back towards the hall, and worried for a moment of his role for the night. He figured he'd be seeing St. Peter sooner than he would have wanted.

* * *

><p>*Thud*<p>

Thud

Thud

Astrid rolled over amidst the constant pounding on the roof by Toothless. The dragon had been at it at least two minutes by now. The room was growing brighter as the gray of the early morning faded into the colors of dawn. Hiccup must have been more hung-over than Astrid had thought. She nudged her husband lightly, hoping he would eventually wake and put an end to Toothless' routine as he usually did. Hiccup lay still, motionless. His unresponsiveness began to worry Astrid.

"Hiccup?"

Thud

Astrid began to worry. Even at his worst Hiccup never slept this deeply. Something was wrong.

"Hiccup?"

Thud

Astrid got out of bed, the cold floor on her feet shocking her awake as her mind began to quickly process her circumstances. Hiccup lay beneath the covers where he had retired that night, much in the same position. He looked to have been sweating profusely, Astrid could feel the moisture on her lower leg.

_It hadn't been that hot beneath the pelts, had it?

—

"Hiccup?"

Thud

Hiccup lay unresponsive. Something was wrong. _Very_ wrong.

"Valka!" Astrid began to lose her early morning indifference as panic began to set in.

"Hiccup? Hiccup wake up damnit!"

Thud

"Valka! Get up here! Something's wrong!"

Thud

Astrid gripped Hiccup's hand as she pulled it from under the covers, throwing them off her husband to expose a paling and limp body. She gripped his wrist tightly, placing a finger on his vein.

Thud

Heartbeat. Good. Astrid's own heart slowed down a pace as she was relieved to find her husband at least alive, if unresponsive.

"Hiccup? Hiccup wake up!" She slapped Hiccup across the face, out of frustration and fear. Nothing. She could hear Valka trudging up the stairs, her footfalls alone indicating a concern for her son.

Thud

Valka threw open the door, concern as equal to if not more visible upon her face than on Astrid's. She rushed over the bed and placed her head on Hiccup's chest, listening. Astrid already knew, but let Valka learn for herself.

Thud

Heartbeat. Good. Valka rolled back onto her knees on top of the bed before leaning over again and peeling open Hiccup's eye. His pupil, rich, dark and dilated stared back at her without meaning, seemingly dead. Valka checked the other eye and found the same haunting result.

"Hiccup? Son?" Astrid could sense the fear in Valka's voice, a tone she couldn't remember ever hearing before from the aged woman. The two women could only stare at the limp and weary shell of a body before them, the light of both their lives lay still, at peace in appearance but internally at war as his body absorbed the nectar of berries that had found their way into a tankard of mead the night before. Valka looked back to Astrid after collecting her thoughts.

"Get dressed and get Gothi with haste." Valka leaped up from the bed with a determination to care for her son. "I'm going to get some tea ready, at least try what remedies I know." With that Valka walked downstairs, eager to set about righting whatever plagued her son, closing the door behind her.

Astrid set about readying herself, continuing to look back at Hiccup lying on the bed. She wanted to cry, she wanted to hit him again, she wanted him to wake up. She noticed how the pounding on the roof had

stopped, and turned to find Toothless having made his way through the window made for him. He slowly made his way to his friend, purring as he did so. He could sense something was wrong just as much as Astrid. He nuzzled his friend's side, Hiccup's arm dropping off the bed limply. Toothless continued to nudge it, begging his friend to wake up. Astrid walked over to the Night Fury's side, putting Hiccup's arm back on the bed and giving Toothless a pat on his head, softly and with the intention to calm the restless dragon's heart.

"It'll be alright Toothless." Astrid looked at the dragon solemnly, wishing she could believe herself.

Thud

* * *

><p>"Wake up."<p>

Luke's light kick into O'Neill's abdomen had been intended as playful, but the knight could not contain his frustration, even amid the early morning exhaustion. He had not slept well that night, anxiety and fear plaguing his every thought. Every sound became the yells of angry Vikings who were coming to kill them and feed them to their dragons, who would rip them limb from limb in front of each other and burn the bones of their remains like the savage beasts they were.

O'Neill sat up on his mattress, gripping his abdomen at the numbing pain the more than forceful blow had given him. He looked to O'Gara anticipating an apology for what he assumed to be a simple inability to gauge one's strength. He found the knight leaning headfirst against a wall, the dawn light cast the shadow of the cross that held the window enveloping his backside.

"What have you done?" It was all the knight could say as he felt the eyes of the bishop staring into him. What had he done? What had O'Gara done? What had they all done? Luke let the warmth of the sunlight ease his back muscles, feeling as though he had strained something in his duel the previous night.

"God's work." The whisper from the bishop struck O'Gara's ears lightly but hit him fiercely. He grew nearly as tired of the phrase as he did being punched in the face, and noticed how the two seemed to be connected. He turned to face the smiling bishop with antagonism on his face, finding the dawn was just an acceptable time as any to make his worries known again.

"I did not know that God's work encouraged the taking of life. Have we been allowed an indulgence oh Holy Father?" Luke's words dripped with bitter sarcasm and the worry that plagued his every thought. The bishop merely gestured his hand away in a manner dismissive of the remark.

"Nobody said anything about killing my child. We merely had need to make Tiridates ill, from there the work of Gregory shall fall into place."

O'Gara grew irritated the bishop's reference again to a random story concerning Armenia.

"Well congratulations, you've poisoned the King. Now all that remains is for them to find out it was you and they'll hang us all from the cliffs!" O'Gara's fears were growing more pronounced in his tone. O'Neill again waved off the concern with his hand.

"Fear not my child, we are in God's hands. His will shall be carried out and we shall be the instrument of it." O'Neill's confidence began to grate on Luke, who walked forward with an accusing finger at the bishop.

"We will be in His hands soon enough once they realize what's going on! Someone is bound to have seen you pour the Night Shade into his mead. It's only a matter of time now, I can feel it." Luke turned again back to the wall, his lack of sleep and pumping adrenaline rendering him in little condition for debate.

"You lack faith Luke. Have trust in the Lord, and all shall be right in the end." The arrogance of the statement enraged O'Gara enough to turn again to the bishop and raise his voice enough to finally rouse the other knights from their drunken state.

"I have faith a plenty! I have faith that you've put us on a road to Hell and it's paved with the scales of a Night Fury! You're insolence is going to get us all killed one way or another, and for what? So you can fulfill some insane vendetta? Some grudge to which I have no part of? Why not just go directly after the dragons while you're at it, it's just as wise and dangerous as what you've done!"

The other knights roused from their beds with hands on their heads in pain as the O'Neill absorbed the criticism of the lone dissenting knight. He rose, not seeming to allow the words to hurt him. He walked over to Luke brimming with an eerie confidence, brushing past his side and moving towards the door as he collected his thoughts.

"I seem to recall many years ago we had found a wayward man of God starving in the streets of Waterford, his sword freshly coated in the blood of a flying devil. I also seem to recall the rage that swelled in his heart as he watched his beloved city smolder around him, so many he had known and loved but ashes in the wind."

"Stop it." O'Gara was blunt in his request, and demanding in his tone.

"I seem to recall an oath, an oath this young knight made before the altar of the only standing church, an oath I have born witness to many times before and since. An oath uttered upon the sword and sanctified in the taker's blood. An oath to protect, and an oath toâ€"

"Shut up!" O'Gara's raised voice was enough to make the bishop turn back towards the knight with suddenness, not out of fear of the raised voice, but in knowing he had made his point perfectly clear. He walked back towards the knight, who could only stare vengefully into the gray eyes of the spiritual man.

"â€|That no mortal instrument nor mortal man shall stop me. No act of evil nor act of nature impair me. No sword nor spear nor devil's wings shall impede me. I act for God, and shall see his Word fulfilledâ€|. "O'Neill gestured to the knight to finish, which he did

as he reluctantly accepted his place.

"Till death brings me to the city atop a hill." Reciting the ending to his oath angered him, the memories of his many attempts in vain to protect Waterford pained him. O'Gara looked to O'Neill, confident in knowing he had bested the knight for the moment.

"Remember who you are my child, where you come from, and all that you represent. Keep true to your faith and intentions and God shall reward you righteously." The bishop walked back to his bed, leaving O'Gara frustrated and torn. O'Neill lay back down on his bed.

"Now if you'll excuse me I feel like sleeping in today." He rolled over and faced the wall, the other knights who had merely watched in their still inebriated states did the same. O'Gara went back to lean against the wall, his mind weary and bitter.

He pulled from beneath his tunic his cross, which he held up to his face a few inches away from him. He had sworn upon this cross, the one he had worn since his youth, of his desire to fulfill God's work. Yet nobody had ever told him what exactly God's work entailed. He clutched the silver cross firmly in his hand, the edges pushing hard into his skin. He looked into the wall, knowing outside and up a steep hill from these docks resided a village that would surely be his doom. He had come to the city, he merely had to climb the hill.

7. Desperate Times

****Call for Desperate Measures.****

* * *

><p>"Nightshade. I'll need some ingredients from distant islands. I will write you list. He'll live, but needs antidote to come out of coma.<p>

It was all Gothi said before turning towards the door of the bedroom, leaving O'Rourke, Astrid, and Valka alone. The three stared at Hiccup, still as limp, pale and without the appearance of life as he had been an hour ago. O'Rourke sensed the heaviness that hung over the room, and backed into a corner trying not to draw attention to himself.

"Soâ€|who goes?" Astrid raised the question to Valka, breaking her out of a focused stare on her helpless son.

"You're his wife, you should stay and take care of him." Valka was sure of her answer, figuring it was a settled issue. She would get the remedy, how could there be a question?

"But you're his mother, isn't that your job?" Astrid wanted to fight for the right to get the ingredients, no matter the distance she had to fly. It was her husband, she would travel to the ends of the nine realms to do what was necessary for him.

"Just because I missed my opportunity doesn't mean I want to fulfill all the obligations of a mother so quickly."

O'Rourke was struck by the brief discussion, and interested in how the two women each vied for the opportunity to be the one to leave their beloved's side and bring the cure for him. Each wanted to help, yet neither wanted to leave.

"I'm just saying that I'm sure he'd rather have his mother by his side than me, you have such a soothing demeanor after all." Astrid knew the argument was weak and rather insulting, but she was too emotionally rattled to think of anything better. "Plus Stormfly is faster."

"Cloudjumper is just as fast. And besides, I'm sure it would reflect better on you if you stayed by his side, being his wife and all."

Astrid couldn't deny the truth in Valka's statement, and she did realize between the two of them that Valka simply wanted it more. The two decades of being away from her child had left her wanting to do at least something along the lines of what she should have been doing had she been on Berk. Astrid conceded, despite how much she wanted rather selfishly to be the one to bring back the remedy to her husband.

"Okay. Go." The simple phrase was all Valka needed to head downstairs, closing the door behind Astrid and O'Rourke. The deacon let the quiet of the occasion pervade as Astrid took a seat by Hiccup's side, having moved him into the center of the bed to make him more comfortable.

"I guess this means I'll take Valka's bed for the next few days."

Astrid whispered to herself in an effort to console her worried heart. O'Rourke maintained his silence, only keeping his eyes on Astrid, then Hiccup, then Astrid again. Astrid, scared Astrid in hastily and randomly assembled clothing sitting on a well made mattress. Behind his stone face Daniel continued to mentally scold himself, to even have such lustful thoughts at such an occasion made him all the more angrier with himself.

Toothless, having taken a few minutes to attend to his morning duties as Alpha given that there would be no morning flight entered back through the window and eased his way into the room. He turned to O'Rourke, his reptilian eyes staring down the black clad figure, this intruder in the room of his master and his mate. He merely let the gesture of silence have its intended effect on Daniel as he moved around to the left side of the bed, laying his head atop Hiccup's chest. He purred and looked into the closed eyes of his friend, the pale lids that closed Toothless off from the emerald set of eyes that mirrored his own discomfited the dragon who could only close his own as he hoped his warmth of his body would soothe his master as it had so many times before. Astrid reached over and laid a palm on Toothless' head before letting it role down his face.

"I know Toothless." Astrid didn't know what she knew, but she felt as though she did. She felt in this moment the closest she would ever come to the bond between Hiccup and Toothless, if only in grief and fleeting hope.

O'Rourke beheld the scene as though he was a fly on the wall. He

stood motionless, quiet, eager not to disturb the woman and dragon before him. He wanted to leave, to let the two grieve. At the same time he wanted to stay, to observe, to perhaps give his own condolences. He hadn't said a word since he had come upstairs at overhearing Astrid's first panicked screams of the morning. He had merely stayed in the shadows, too concerned to act.

I could put my arm around her...to console her...GET AHOLD OF YOURSELF DAMNIT!

"When could he have eaten Nightshade? He knows better than that." Astrid continued to whisper to herself and now to Toothless. O'Rourke looked on.

"Someone must have put Nightshade in his food. But how, and who?" Astrid's tone became stronger as she began to ponder the question. "Who would want to poison you?" She brushed the pale cheek of her husband, her voice softening again at the pitiful sight.

Toothless purred again, knowing his best friend wasn't waking up worried him, and the dragon remembered the first time this had happened, six years ago. The dragon hoped his rider would not have to lose another leg like he did last time. The dragon opened his eye as he realized his effort to console and to wake his friend wasn't working, to find in its view the black clad intruder. This vermin, this foreign contaminant in the chamber of his master. He navigated back to the front of the bed and closed in on Daniel, slowly and intentionally intimidating the Irishman as he stepped closer. Daniel kept quiet, but fear began to pulse through his veins. The once adorable kitten like creature that had sat by his feet last night now returned to its true form, to the terrifying unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Toothless growled as he closed in, O'Rourke backing up as far into the corner as he could, knowing he had put himself in a bad position.

"Toothlessâ€¦stop." The dragon halted but a footstep away from the Irishman, locking his eyes with the foreigner. Toothless looked into his eyes, the blue eyes that contrasted so harshly against the fair skin and black hair of Daniel, and saw his fear. Toothless sniffed at O'Rourke, trying to smell something harmful, something malevolent about him, something that would explain the discomfort of his master. Nothing. The dragon backed off, taking a seat at the foot of the bed as Astrid looked back between the two black coated creatures, one a dragon, one a man.

"Sorry, I guess he's just suspicious. He means a lot to Toothless, he means a lot toâ€¦" Astrid looked back at Hiccup, as still as ever on the bed. She placed a hand on his forehead, noting his fever but not concerned. She just wanted to feel him, his presence, to know there was still life in him somewhere. O'Rourke, from recesses he found himself having to regularly tap while on Berk mustered the courage to at last move forward, knowing the solemnity of the moment had been disturbed by the Night Fury's inquisition a moment ago. Astrid recognized the movement and gestured Daniel forward.

"It's okay Daniel, he won't hurt you." While it wasn't the Night Fury O'Rourke was so much afraid of, he still stepped over it cautiously and made his way to the opposite side of the bed. He sat down carefully, taking up as little room as possible as he looked down to his host, the man who ruled an island of Vikings, flew a Night Fury

and had threatened not to long ago to carelessly thrown Daniel to his death was rendered a sickly, hollow shell. Daniel kept his silence, fearful of doing anything to upset the situation.

"Why?" Astrid's question, addressed to no one in particular came out in a high pitch as she struggled to control herself. It made no sense, it wasn't right. Whatever or whoever was the reason for her husband's misfortune would pay, she was sure of this. But for the moment she could only face her reality, the reality of a comatose love upon the precipice of death, not the most pleasant of sights to wake up to by any stretch of the imagination.

"Why?" She said it again, the lump at the back of her throat receding as she remembered it wasn't polite company to emotionally break down in front of a house guest. Daniel felt a compulsion to respond against his most urgent desires to let his presence be enough of a consolation to the wife of his host.

"Iâ€¦I can't say." A poor response, Daniel knew this, but he could think of nothing else to break the tension with. The two looked at Hiccup from their respective sides of the bed, neither quite sure where to go from where they were.

Astrid continued to keep her gaze down at Hiccup. Despite all her strength, despite all her fortitude and reputation, despite everything she had done in the past to help Hiccup, she could do nothing now but pat his head, a futile gesture of conciliation for herself.

"May the Valkyries not yet claim you, for your time is not done. May Odin stay his hand, for there is battle to be won. Your boat shall not yet sail today, only here is where you lay." Astrid whispered the short poem with the care of a true healer, her hand rolling down Hiccup's face. She remembered O'Rourke's close presence and looked up to him, feeling slightly embarrassed at the public show of weakness.

"It'sâ€¦just an old prayer my mother taught me when I was sick." O'Rourke only nodded, silently appreciating the gesture. He felt compelled to add, to do something to make himself no longer just a presence in the room. Staggering a few times, he finally compelled his voice in its most diplomatic and easy tone to mutter forth.

"Our Father, who art in heavenâ€¦" Astrid's glance stopped him. It was not one of antagonism, but merely one of curiosity. Still, Daniel felt he had just committed a grave insult, and kept his head down in fear of retribution.

"Is that a prayer?" Astrid asked, curious to the few words Daniel had gotten out before stopping. He looked up at Astrid's inquisitive face, and found enough fortitude to respond.

"Umâ€¦yes. The Lord's Prayer. It's just a standard one for us, handed down from Jesus himself. Useful for any situation really." O'Rourke hoped his poor and awkwardly given explanation would be enough to satisfy Astrid's interest, to make her focus back on her husband. Instead she inquired further, hoping to invite Daniel into the solemn moment.

"How do your people pray?" Astrid figured it was a simple enough

question, but Daniel hesitated in answering for a moment, unsure of how to proceed. Still, that part of his mind that did not think and judge as much as his waking self steadily moved his hand forward, lightly touching Astrid's as it lay on Hiccup's chest. Astrid was unsure of where the deacon was going, but decided not to pull away just yet, thinking it best to see O'Rourke's intentions before acting.

"Wellâ€¦.weâ€¦. take our handâ€¦" O'Rourke raised Astrid's hand in the air, and with caution moved it back towards her forehead. Astrid kept her composure, fascinated with the ritual the strange man performed with her. Toothless raised his head, growling slowly at the sight he beheld. O'Rourke began to back his hand away, but Astrid held it firm.

"It's alright Toothless." The dragon merely lowered his head down again, displeased at not being able to remove the foreigner from his master's side. But the wife of a chief commanded respect, even from an Alpha dragon. Astrid gestured with her face for Daniel to continue, which he did with increasing caution.

"And we start on our head and sayâ€¦." Daniel used his other hand to make the movement on his own body in an effort to show solidarity with Astrid. With Astrid's hand in his grasp, he touched it lightly against her head.

"In the name of the Fatherâ€¦" O'Rourke moved both his hand and Astrid's downward, using all the restraint in his body to keep his distance over her midsection. He brought both hands down over their respective abdomens, and pressed again.

"And the Sonâ€¦." He again moved the hands over their respective midsections, and crossed Astrid's shoulders slowly with what he hoped to be only holy intentions.

"And the Holy Spirit. And then weâ€¦." Daniel reached with his free hand towards Astrid's other free hand. Astrid complied in giving it to the deacon, mystified in the foreign ritual in which she partook over her husband's body.

"And then we take our hands, and we fold themâ€¦.like this." Daniel crossed Astrid's hands together forming what Astrid took to be a conjoined fist. He laid his own hands over them in a looser version of the same gesture, and bowed his head to Astrid.

"And then we pray." O'Rourke took a deep breath before beginning, trying not to obsess over the feeling of Astrid's hands beneath his own. Astrid bowed her own head, feeling somewhat ashamed of partaking in the foreign way of prayer. Yet at the same time, it felt oddly soothing. She could feel as if the very manner of initiating prayer had steadied her resolve, even as she looked at Hiccup's limp body she could feel more at ease, as if Hiccup was with her still, beside her as she anticipated listening to the Celt before her.

"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against usâ€¦" O'Rourke took a moment to swallow and breath, trying not to contemplate the repercussions of the next line. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from

evilâ€|Amen."

He looked back up at Astrid, who could only keep her gaze on Hiccup. Amen? What did that word mean? It was not Norse, but Astrid could not concern herself with such things. She only let silence befall the room again as O'Rourke finished the prayer. She felt a desire to add, to bring something to the solemn occasion Daniel had initiated. She looked up to the Irishman, as nervous as ever. She was unsure of herself, and unsure at how to end the moment. She could only stare back down at Hiccup's face, motionless as ever in the morning light. She could come up with no words, no phrase to describe her feelings, and found herself only able to whisper.

"Amen."

* * *

><p>Hiccup was flying, he knew that much. Where he was, he knew less. He saw nothing but darkness, he felt nothing but darkness. Wind rushed across his body, he could feel his hair flowing back, and yet he had no idea where he was flying to. He was flying. He could feel his legs shifting around something. Something large and warm.<p>

"Toothless?"

"Hello Hiccup."

The voice was soft, ethereal, as if not even there and yet all around Hiccup at the same time. Hiccup felt down into the darkness with his hands, managing to lightly grip the dragon's back. Still the same warm scales as he was used to, although indistinguishable from the black shroud around him. He wasn't sure where the voice came from, or who it was, but knew only that he sat atop his best friend

"Toothless?"

"You were expecting another Night Fury?"

The wit and sarcasm of the ghostly voice was more than enough for Hiccup press on.

"I'm dreaming aren't I?"

"Sure."

Hiccup looked around himself into nothing, nothing but blackness, not even the dragon he supposedly rode was distinguishable, not even the hand in front of Hiccup's face could be realized. Darkness, nothing but and only darkness.

"I'm dreaming." Hiccup felt Toothless even more strongly, finding his only comfort came from the warm body below him, its temperature and the gentle winds rushing by his face were all he could sense.

"Are you real Toothless?" Hiccup felt it was as stupid question, but needed just to have consolation, to here the low, whispering voice again to know he was actually in control of this dream.

"I am as real as you desire me to be."

"And what does that mean?" Hiccup felt odd engaging in such a conversation with his best friend-in his subconscious no less- but felt no rush to end the scenario. The lack of sight oddly soothed him, the touch of his friend and the gentle kiss of wind were all he needed to rest.

"If you desire me, I will be here for you. Should you not desire me, I can leave."

"I'd rather not have to perform solo flying right now."

"I'd rather you never, but I appreciate the consideration."

The dragon's candor was enough to bring a smile to Hiccup's face, even if it would go unseen by anything amidst the darkness. Having established some sort of accord with his own dream, Hiccup felt relaxed enough to engage in better conversation.

"Where are we Toothless?"

"Up in the air, where else should we be?" Hiccup knew he was going to have to battle with his own sarcastic inner self if he was to get anything accomplished.

"Okay, but why is it so dark?"

"Because there is no light."

"Thanks, I can see that."

"On the contrary, you see nothing."

"I see that I cannot see."

"So then see."

"Easier said than done."

"Then I'd advise talking."

Hiccup was impressed at being outwitted by himself, and allowed the rush of wind to carry away the conversation for the moment. Something nagged at his subconscious, a phrase he barely recalled, and barely recalled heaving heard. Still it persisted, persisting amidst all Hiccup's desire to merely enjoy the calm of darkness. He looked around himself, looked into nothing. The thought persisted. Not quite sure of what else to do, Hiccup threw his arms out into the nothingness and placed all his energy into a single phrase, unsure of where it had come from.

"Well then, let there be light!"

The echo fell against the wind, seemingly carried away without any impact. Then there came from above Hiccup a dot, seemingly nothing at first, but multiplying rapidly, spreading out above him in waves and torrents. From horizon to horizon above Hiccup a great quilt of stars enveloped the sky, spread out as randomly as they would be on any conventional night. Hiccup brought his hand back up to his face, now

illuminated against the starlight.

"Wow." Hiccup saw for miles all around him, wisps of clouds hung easily besides him, gently passing out of sight as he soared above a dark blue ocean. He could finally see Toothless beneath him, the black hide just illuminated enough to be barely distinguishable against the sky. Dark enough to hide in, too bright to be invisible.

"I'm dreaming."

"Yes, we've established that."

Hiccup patted Toothless on the back of his neck, enjoying the snarky attitude of his friend regardless. The skin felt warm beneath him, almost real. Hiccup knew something was off about the whole occurrence, it seemed so real, yet he knew it was all a dream.

"Toothless, I feel like something is wrong. This doesn't feelâ€|right. I've never had a dream like this before."

"You're going to be asleep for a while Hiccup, much longer than usual."

"What?"

"Welcome to the world of dreams, I'd advise settling in for the time being."

Hiccup was confused by the reality, or what seemed like reality that confronted him.

"Areâ€|you in my dreams?"

"If that is what you desire."

Hiccup was frustrated at the statement, finding it again impeded a direct answer. Still, he couldn't find it in himself to argue with himself- his snarky, draconic self. He leaned in towards Toothless' head, soothed by the feel of the hide.

"Stay with me bud."

"Don't I always?"

Hiccup decided not to alter the mood of the moment, and let the sarcasm fall off his shoulders. He sat back up, admiring only the majesty of the peace of the view. His memory drifted back to a similar night six years before, when on such a night he had made the single greatest discovery in Viking history, and had his first kiss, all in the course of a few hours. He felt a pair of arms wrap around him, a pair of young female arms. He dared not turn, dared not talk, dare not disturb the cherished feeling. He closed his eyes, and let the starlit flight continue.

* * *

><p>Beneath a blanket of young stars O'Rourke sat up against an oak tree many generations his superior. His robe mingled in and out of

his own vision amidst the darkness, his bible by his side and undisturbed. From his place he kept watch over the village, the village that had taken the wayward Irish in, and to the house that had become his own these past few days. He held his hands together, almost in a position of prayer but unable to tighten themselves any further, as if they covered another set of invisible hands below him. He wanted to pray, but at the same time merely wanted to sit still, to not even meditate, just to sit still, separate from the world around him.<p>

"I heard I'd find you around here."

O'Rourke turned quickly to find Luke to his left, having stealthily made his way up the hill O'Rourke sat upon. His white robe flowed easily in the evening breeze and was more visible against the starlight.

"Lukeâ€|hi." It was all Daniel could manage, and it was all Luke needed to approach, feeling not as though he interrupted anything of importance. He had as much a desire to be alone in the night as Daniel, and figured the two loners could share company. He needed to think, to try and wrap his head around the convoluted set of circumstances he had found himself caught up in. They both did.

"May I?" Luke took a seat next to Daniel two feet away, the cold grass crunching beneath him. Daniel did little to strike up conversation, not feeling a desire to talk to his only real friend amongst the survivors. O'Gara was then able to take the conversational lead.

"So then...what's new with you Daniel?" O'Gara needed something to distract himself, to take his mind off the fears that lingered in the back of his mind of someone seeing O'Neill's capital sin against Hiccup committed.

Right, O'Neill.

O'Gara felt a compulsion to share that information with O'Rourke. But at the same time knew he would likely share it with his host's family, which would likely lead to their collective deaths.

"Oh you know, the usual."

Luke smiled at the indifference but still struggled with telling his friend over the business he and the rest of his comrades had been up to. He decided to keep his mouth shut over the matter. He feared too much for the safety of his friend, and his own to risk exposing what may just have been a perfectly committed crime. He let silence fall back upon the two. He felt he had to do something, he needed to talk about it, and yet not talk about it at the same time.

"Soâ€|.we heard about the chief."

"Yes, shame that."

It would be all the two could talk about on the matter. O'Gara worried too much to push the issue further. He felt ashamed of his cowardice, but knew it was for their mutual survival. He looked over to Daniel, who kept his silent watch over the village, a village that meant different things to each of them. Luke continued to have a

desire to speak, and brought up the first topic that came to mind.

"Odd people these heathens."

O'Rourke let a moment of silence of pass before responding.

"They're not all bad." The simple response O'Gara found typical of the rather apathetic deacon, but it still interested him in how Daniel seemed to brush off any criticism of the Vikings, as if he truly didn't mind them, that he was perhaps enjoying his time on Berk.

"So, how's the Night Fury been treating you?"

Daniel took a moment to consider the question. He had for the past several days shared a house with the unholy offspring and lightning and death itself. And its name was Toothless. A beast that he had come to admire, and continued to fear. A beast that had eaten from his hand a few nights ago, and had threatened to kill him that morning.

"You know, like any good dragon."

"Good dragon?!" O'Gara chuckled at the statement, noting how it contrasted so sharply with everything. Everything the two had been taught, everything he had known, had seen, turned upside down upon their washing up on this island. O'Rourke caught on to the irony and managed a grin.

"Strange I know."

The two allowed silence to befall them again as they both looked back out over the village. It kept still, nothing but the smoke rising from holes in roofs, and the occasional fluttering of dragon wings as the shadows of demons moved about in their sleep. Without the constant abrupt movements of the reptilian devils, O'Gara could at last relish in the simple beauty of the village outlined in the darkness.

"Luke?"

"Yeah?"

Daniel paused, knowing the question he was about to pose could bring him severe repercussions if the truth behind them was revealed.

"Have you ever been in love?"

O'Gara was caught rather off guard by the question. In their many years of travels together, as he had watched O'Rourke mature amidst a life spent on the roads of Ireland and in the chaos of Cork, he had never known his friend to ask such questions. He was not one who typically concerned himself with such worldly matters given both his vocation and his nature. Though he wanted to have more information as why O'Rourke asked such a thing, he knew the moment he did so Daniel's shy nature would make himself withdraw the question. He decided to answer as peacefully as he could, hoping to eventually coax a reason for the query out of Daniel.

"Once. Before I pledged service to the bishop." O'Rourke said nothing, and O'Gara allowed himself to fall back into his memory.

"I had just joined in the defenses of Waterford. I was new to the area and couldn't trust anybody. Then she came into my life. Agnes. Beautiful Agnes. Gorgeous red hair and such a disarming personality. For a brief few months she was the light of my life."

O'Gara trailed off as he finished the sentence, his words hanging a moment amidst the lack of wind. Daniel turned to his friend, whose silence was as loud a sorrow as the cries of a child.

"What happened?" O'Gara now found himself the shy one, as if the man beside him were the warrior, and he a simple and shy boy.

"A raid. Got lost in a cloud of Zippleback gas. It exploded before I even realized she was missing. Buried the remains, whatever did remain that night in a mass grave with the rest of the dead."

Luke let the last words have their dramatic impact, not that he cared much over what words had an effect on Daniel. He found bitter emotions swirling inside him, a longing for home pervaded his mind as the shadow of a Nadder groomed itself in the distance.

"What's it like?" Daniel's follow up question in its innocence of curiosity was enough to raise Luke's spirit sufficiently to continue the conversation. He didn't look at Daniel, only letting his words pass through the darkness between them.

"It is the greatest blessing God has ever granted the mind. Albeit the greatest curse the devil ever granted the body." O'Gara couldn't remember where he had heard the phrase before, likely by one of the many pastors that passed in and out of Cork. But it had stayed with him, guided him, helped him through many an awkward encounter, especially on Berk. Daniel kept silent a few feet away from Luke, absorbing the words and their implications.

"Thanks." It was all Daniel could think of to respond to the words of wisdom from his friend, a friend he could barely see. The two kept their visions separate, two friends atop the hill had poured their hearts out to each other, and neither knew the purpose of the other, each shrouded in darkness.

* * *

><p>Drink. It was the only thought Astrid had on her mind since she had woken. To be more precise, after she had risen to realize her husband still lay motionless in their bed as he had the morning before. Daniel had come in late and left early that morning, earlier than usual. Astrid couldn't handle much but had at least held her sobriety through the morning and in dealing with Hiccup's immediate physical needs. But as the sun reached its apex in the sky and began its slow descent downwards to the West, she needed a comfort, a crutch, even if only a liquid one. She had entered the hall only recently and noted its deserted nature, understandable considering the day was still young, the night not yet even present. She had poured herself only a small goblet of ale, deciding she would rather savor the taste than render herself incapable of caring for Hiccup altogether. She sat at her own table, her back resting up against a

large support beam.<p>

She knew Hiccup would be okay, Gothi had said so and she was sure of that. Valka would be back in a few days at most and then Hiccup would be better. But for now he lay still on their bed, the bed that they had slept in as a happy couple for not more than a year. She grasped the goblet with both hands, her hands wrapping around the cup and touching each other. She recalled yesterday what O'Rourke had showed her, the way in which the Irish prayed. The calm of yesterday morning, the feeling of that brief interlude returned to her.

What had she done? As sentiment gave way to analysis she began to realize what she had inadvertently done. She had prayed to a foreign god, and over Hiccup's body. Oh Odin above _what had she done_? She hung her head in shame, not that anybody around could shame her. She clutched her hands even more tightly, gripping them in the manner she had done the day before in a manner that both eased and enraged her.

What did she care? She had never been the most faith filled Viking on Berk. Hiccup tended to concern himself with that, not her. What did it matter to anyone what she thought of this new faith, this new idea brought by strange foreigners? She was an adult, she could make her own decisions. At the same time she couldn't. Not to Hiccup. She couldn't do this to Hiccup. And yet she already had. She had joined hands with an Irishman and prayed to his god, his one and only god over Hiccup's chest yesterday morning. The very morning after Hiccup had sacrificed a pristine yak to Odin, had invoked the gods to give them good fortune, had participated in one of the most sacred rituals of Berk, she had prayed to a totally different god right over his unconscious body.

Astrid removed her clutched hands from the goblet and leaned back against the support beam, trying to maintain both her posture and composure. She felt dirty, unclean. She felt as though she had spit on Hiccup in his sleep. Everything Hiccup had stood for, everything he had done, everything he had tried to do to live in his father's footsteps Astrid had insulted in just muttering a few words, even ones with good intentions. She quickly grabbed and downed that ale which remained in her goblet, noting how it tasted old and quite warm. It, much like her actions left a bad taste in her mouth.

She found herself feeling resentment towards Daniel, his smooth tone of voice and intriguing mannerisms. At the same time, she couldn't bring herself to actually hate him. Despite his enticing her to commit an insult to Hiccup and everything he stood for, he had good intentions. He was just an honest Irishman trying to do what he could for his gracious host. It was more than Astrid could say for the rest of the Irishmen. She didn't trust them, and she doubted many did especially now that word had gotten around of the insult given by their leader. A feeling, a hunch, and nagging sensation at the back of her mind led Astrid to consider they could be behind Hiccup's misfortune. They were the only ones that she could reasonably consider. It made sense. The Irish hate dragons, and especially Night Furies. So then it was reasonable to try and kill the rider of the Night Fury, andâ€¦|.

Something didn't make sense. Why would they try and kill Hiccup? What purpose would that serve them? They would then just make an island of angry and vengeful Vikings and their dragons eager to kill them in

response. Could they have not intended to kill him? But what sense would that make? It would just lead to the same situation and without the desired result of killing the leader. Astrid was confused. And even if it was the Irish, she had no proof of anything at the moment. Nobody had seemed to have seen anything, and nobody had yet launched their own personal vendetta against the Irish as was the Viking way.

Speculation, it was all she had going for her at the moment. She could only hope when Hiccup woke they could find a way to pin this on the Irish.

O'Rourke. There was the problem. If it was the Irish, at least the bishop, the rest of the village would still want to kill O'Rourke as well. But O'Rourke wasâ€|different. She couldn't see him wanting to do anything to hurt Hiccup. Then again, he was very emotional that night he talked about the Night Fury raid on the monastery. No. it couldn't be him. He had adjusted to the dragons far too well to just go and poison his host. But at the same time, he would have had the most ready access to Hiccup out of all the Irishmen. Maybe that's what it had been all along, the effort to get to know each other better had merely been an attempt by the Bishop to poison Hiccup.

No. It couldn't be. It just didn't make sense for O'Rourke to do this. He was too nice, too shy, too nervous to do anything so audacious. Astrid couldn't make sense of it all. Nothing made sense at this point. Blasphemy, attempted murder, and a compelling young Irishman. Just another day on Berk.

"Astrid?"

Eret, son of Eret approached Astrid slowly, hoping he had not disturbed her from anything too important. He sat across from her, keeping quiet until invited to speak by Astrid herself.

"Hi Eret."

"â€|Son of Eret. Soâ€|How's Hiccup doing?"

"Fine." Astrid was soft in her speech, not particularly interested in talking but welcoming the opportunity to maybe get her mind off things.

"Well that's good." It was a simple response from Eret, Son of Eret who usually preferred more intricate sentences and proud lingo. He instead kept his language easy, not wanting to annoy Astrid with his usual boisterous self. He instead found himself only able to talk about the only thing anyone on Berk could talk about at the time, the Irish.

"Soâ€|how about those Irish?"

Even though the medium had changed from introspection to conversation, Astrid saw she could not escape the spell of mistrust and intrigue the Irish had placed over the village.

"Yeah." Another simple response, but it carried full recognition of the situation at hand, a situation Astrid did not find herself enjoying being in the middle of. Eret, Son of Eret decided to press

on with the conversation, hoping what he considered to be a light hearted topic would brighten the complexion of Astrid's face.

"I heard there's a group of girls that's rather interested in one the dark haired one living with you and Hiccup. How's that been working out for you?"

He managed a smile at the remark, which though against the intentions of her thoughts brought out the same reaction in Astrid. The admirers, they would be another issue entirely if Astrid could prove it was the Irish behind the poisoning.

"Yeah, they're an interesting bunch." Astrid recalled how they had seemed to have fallen under a spell in O'Rourke's presence. She saw how enthralled they were whenever he spoke, his every movement and phrase carefully analyzed by them. They were probably up in the mountain mint fields right now, goading him on for information about anything and everything.

"Don't really understand what all the fuss is about. Must have to be a girl to understand it."

Eret, Son of Eret hoped the mildly snide remark would draw another smile out of Astrid, whom he hoped desperately to cheer amidst the circumstances placed against her. Astrid considered the thought for a moment. She had to see Daniel again, both to protect him from the ravenous horde, but also because she merely wanted to. She had nothing to do, and an endlessly curious mind. If she was committing an insult to the gods, they would strike her down. She was a Viking, it was an occupational hazard. She stood up from the table, worrying Eret, Son of Eret in that he'd said something wrong. Astrid collected herself, and gestured to Eret, Son of Eret with her hand to follow.

* * *

><p>The air was warm again, especially given the time of year. Astrid was relieved to feel the sunlight sooth her back as she made her way into the mint fields, Eret, Son of Eret following behind.<p>

"What's so important about this guy anyway?" He bleated out as he tripped over a rock.

"If you want to understand what all the fuss is about you have to confront the fuss!"

Astrid found the playful statement helped liven her mood as the soothing aroma of the mountain mint struck her. Gentle at first like always, growing stronger the more one moved around in it until the aroma enveloped you like a large coat, its scent being just as comforting as the warmth off fur against the cold. As she ascended the hill she saw what she expected, a group of women gathered close together, O'Rourke sitting a close distance away book opened and nervously reading.

"Daniel!" Astrid shouted just loudly enough to get his attention and to have him break away from his reading. His heart soared and sank upon seeing Astrid nearing, though he could distract himself from this by summing up the man who trailed behind her.

"Astridâ€|.hi."

Astrid accepted the greetings of the deacon and the eight girls both young and old that sat in the grass.

Eight... two more than last time.

Astrid made a note of this as she motioned Eret, Son of Eret to sit as she did the same. Daniel kept a wary eye on the two as he got back to his book, interrupted by Astrid before he could continue.

"Soâ€|what are we talking about today?"

"Just the Jesus person again." The nonchalant answer came from one of the women in the back.

"Oh, well then by all means don't let us stop you, continue Daniel." Astrid motioned to the deacon as he lowered his head back into his book.

"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights heâ€|"

"Hey this is what we heard a couple days ago!"

"Yeah!"

A clamor of agreement came from the women as O'Rourke looked, nervous at the commotion.

"Isâ€|there a problem?"

"This is what the old one was saying a couple days ago, we already heard this! Tell us another one!"

Another clamor came up as the deacon blushed out of nervousness. He turned the page of the bible and noticed it came to an important story and one he had not yet told. Confident he had an enticing enough set of words before him to dazzle his audience, he motioned with a hand for quiet and set about reading.

"Now when Jesus saw the crowds he sent up to the mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them."

O'Rourke looked up to find the Vikings again interested in what he had to say. He knew the words that followed would make or break their interest in him. He steadied his voice as he recited what he held to be the core of his faith to strangers.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are

persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Silence held its grip on the audience as O'Rourke let the lines sink in, catching his breath as he did so. The Vikings looked to each other, Astrid managing a glance at Eret, Son of Eret who was as equally interested in the words as the women. One from the crowd broke the silence with a stutter at first before making her point.

"Butâ€¦what does that mean?" The group nodded in support of the question, not quite sure what was intended by the repeated phrases. O'Rourke composed a response, hoping to do justice by the words he held so dear to him.

"Theseâ€¦we call these the Beatitudes. We believe that they do more than anything else to summarize the teachings of our faith. It is those mentioned, those who make peace, who are pure of heart, who are merciful towards others, it is they who shall be rewarded in the next life."

"But what of battle? What of those who die in battle? Do they not go to Valhaâ€¦Heaven?"

The question startled Daniel, both in how loud it was said by one of the women and its nature. O'Rourke managed to craft his response quickly enough so as not to look as though he had been stumped.

"In a perfect world in which all followed such teachings, there would be no need for battle. Even then, if one fights for a cause that is just, that is right, that leads to God's will being fulfilled, they too shall be rewarded."

O'Rourke decided the answer would have to do, and he dared not raise the issue of the endemic warfare that plagued the continent far to the South, fearing it would disrupt the meaning of what he was trying to say. He looked over to Astrid who kept her gaze firmly fixed on him, a realization that made him nervous again. He forced his mind to keep her away from his thoughts as he turned back to address the crowd.

"Soâ€¦that's part of the story." O'Rourke wasn't sure where to go from here. He felt at least to himself that they could perhaps stop and talk about the Beatitudes some more. But the crowd desired not so much as to study the words, but to hear them, to better understand the man who said them, both in the present and a thousand years past.

"Continue."

O'Rourke turned to Astrid, whose call for him to resume his speaking overwhelmed any other desires he had, and filled him with desires he didn't want.

"Well I suppose we have enough daylightâ€¦."

O'Rourke turned back to the bible and continued to read from the chapter, the Vikings continuing to hang on his every word peeled from the foreign text. Astrid relaxed amidst the aroma of the mint and listened, finding she enjoyed the event even more than she had the

last two times.

The whole event eased her, made her forget for the time being Hiccup, the rest of the Irish, all the chaos of recent days. Yet at the same time she had to keep fighting herself into believing she wasn't betraying Hiccup, wasn't insulting him. She knew when he woke up-which he would- that she'd have to find a way to convince him at least of Daniel's good nature, that not all the Irish were bad. For the time being, she could only sit in the grass, close her eyes, and join the crowd in listening and learning until the sun fell from the sky.

8. Dancing and Dreaming

****Supposedly pleasant activities.****

* * *

><p>Despite how much he tried to set an example, O'Gara didn't seem capable of convincing the rest of his comrades to keep their heads down. They continued in their usual boisterous merrymaking that prevailed in the presence of mead and had no qualms about drawing attention to themselves. While the hall was mostly deserted for the time being, villagers coming in for dinner would always keep their eyes affixed on the Irishmen as they drank and made themselves at home in a less than welcoming environment. Night was falling, there would be more Vikings coming in soon. O'Gara didn't look forward to that. Fear still nagged at the back of his mind. O'Neill kept a goblet of ale by his side, sipping from it on occasion and paying little attention to the hostile atmosphere around them. O'Gara began a conversation in Norse so as not to draw the attention of his fellow knights.<p>

"So how exactly is this plan supposed to work again?"

O'Neill raised his hand and kept a manner of complacency. O'Gara lifted a finger and pointed it at the bishop.

"And I swear on the Blessed Virgin if you say anything about "God's Work" or Armenia it will be the last thing you say."

O'Gara surprised himself with the aggression in his tone and the growing lack of respect he held towards the bishop despite his continued but begrudged loyalty. O'Neill placed his hand down and gathered a more coherent response.

"If it is specifics and intricacies you desireâ€|"

"Yes please."

"â€|You see then my child, my actions I have done so that we may have time to perform Goâ€"our workings, our efforts to bring these peoples into the fold of enlightenment. With the chief incapacitated, he and his personal devil shall not interfere with our efforts."

"But we have hardly made any such efforts over the past several days, would now not be better spent then in the town square?" O'Gara found the bishop's plan not making much sense, O'Neill thus extrapolated.

"I didn't say anything about us doing the work." O'Gara shortened his brow in confusion as O'Neill took a sip from his goblet.

"Butâ€¦you just saidâ€¦"

"I know what I said, you it appears do not. You seeâ€¦."

The doors to the hall opened into the night. Emerging from the darkness came a figure dressed in black, escorted by a throng of Viking girls and one man who formed a semicircle behind him. The leader walked with pride in his heart and fear in his mind as the Vikings, the males in particular eyed him with great frustration at the sight. Matthew and John beckoned Daniel closer. The deacon complied with the request and bid a brief farewell to his female escorts who went to talking amongst themselves about the other Irishmen.

"Daniel! Starting up a brothel are we?" Matthew's remark managed a nervous smile out of the deacon as he approached, not greatly caring for discussion with his comrades in the midst of his adornment, even by girls who reeked of haddock.

"Good evening Father, lads."

The knights raised a toast in welcoming their fellow Celt over, though curious as to how the shy and less than palatable deacon had amassed such a group of fans under the circumstances.

"Soâ€¦you taken a liking to any of them yet?" O'Conner poised the question with slurred speech, seeming to forget the so far celibate nature of the deacon. O'Rourke convinced himself he was not lying when he responded.

"Noâ€¦none so far." He smiled at O'Conner, hoping to divert his attention with a smile as he looked to the bishop, his spiritual leader. He had heard about the way O'Neill had insulted the now comatose chief, an action that had almost resulted in Daniel's death at the hands of the enraged dragon rider. The bishop nodded his head in statement of greeting. O'Rourke moved to his left to get in a better view of the bishop and took a seat at another table just close enough to continue conversation.

"Father, I was wondering about what you said to the chief a few days agoâ€¦"

"Ah yes! The chief, shame about that."

O'Gara looked to O'Neill, interested in the impending conversation. While he was too concerned for his own safety to reveal the truth of what had happened to Daniel, he didn't know whether or not the bishop would be so wise so as not to do so given his recent string of dangerous deeds.

"Yes and wellâ€¦I was just wondering if you were going to apologize for that givenâ€¦you knowâ€¦the current conditions?"

"Already done my child. Right Luke?" O'Neill turned towards the knight who nodded in agreement, allowing himself to believe the words he had said two nights ago were in fact genuine in their

sincerity.

"Ohâ€|okay then." O'Rourke didn't bother to push the one subject any further and was distracted a moment by the grating laughter of one of his followers amidst the small crowd that eagerly awaited his return. O'Neill noticed how O'Rourke turned back to look at them and decided to press his own issue.

"I take it the Word has begun to reach them?" O'Rourke turned at the question, finding somehow nervous at explaining what he was raised to do to the man who had taught him all that he in turn taught.

"Umâ€|wellâ€|I guess so. They still have much to learn, but they are taking good interest, and I guess that's something."

"More than something my child, a very nice accomplishment." The knights raised their tankards in support as O'Rourke shied his head away at the recognition.

"It's nothing really."

"Nonsense my child! There is a good spot in heaven for a man who can convert such heathens away from their blasphemous ways. You are doing God's work!" O'Neill exchanged a look with a frustrated O'Gara before turning back to face the deacon.

"So thenâ€|where do you go from here?"

"Wellâ€|I really don't know about that yet. I mean yes they are interested but we will surely be departing back for Ireland soon. We could perhaps come back in a few more months with a few more priests and bibles but as for now I-"

"And swords! And knights!" O'Conner burst out the demands loud enough to cause a sudden lull in the hall, not that anyone could understand the Gaelic demands except the Irish. O'Rourke looked to O'Neill, amused at first at the inebriated outburst but finding the bishop did not show as much light heartedness at the statement as Daniel. O'Rourke looked more closely at the bishop as his face remained the same.

"Father, is everything allâ€" "

"What about the dragons? Have you begun to discuss them with your little band?"

"Uhâ€|.no not in any great detail. I've discussed the rumors they've heard of our savior being some great dragon warrior but we haven'tâ€" "

"When do you intend to discuss it with them?" The bishop's tone grew firmer with the deacon, an occurrence Daniel had never greatly appreciated.

"Well I haven't really thought it a necessity at theâ€" "

"Soon deacon, soon please."

"Soon what?" O'Neill was surprised he even had to explain what he had

implied, as though he was talking to one of the foreigners and not one of his own. He leaned over the table and towards the deacon, intent on clearing any confusion that may linger in the young mind.

"Danielâ€¦if we are to welcome these Vikings into our fold we must at some point have to deal with their alliance with the demons. Only through their disposal can we truly make progress in developing these people into proper followers of the Lord."

Daniel took a moment to absorb the words and their implications before responding. He gathered his courage and launched a retaliation against the bishop.

"Father, with all due respect you're thinking rashly here. I have been living with the Night Fury for several days now and it has done nothing to harm me."

O'Rourke took a moment to recall the several times the beast had given him nasty looks and approached him in a predatory way. He pushed these to the back of his mind as he continued.

"We have no reason to fear them, I assure you. Whatever the chief has done has made them not the beasts we have known them to be. And more so what difference does it make to our faith about the nature of these dragons? If they are docile, there is no reason to treat them any differently than any other of God's creatures.

"Blasphemer!" O'Neill leaned as far across the table as he could and pointed a finger at the deacon, now becoming worried at the raised demeanor of the bishop.

"And what then when we return home? Are we to just forget all the pain we regularly endure just because on this one island man has learned to tame the beast, which need I remind you are the devil's creations? Are we to sacrifice everything that we are just because you can't help but break the news to your little convent that they have sided with devils?"

O'Neill reclined back on his bench as his abdomen buckled under the pressure of his awkward stance and gestured with a finger again to Daniel.

"Remember who you are my child. Remember where you come from, and who you are. Certainly don't letâ€¦thisâ€¦" O'Neill gestured to the group of Vikings who anticipated Daniel's return. "â€¦interfere with your duty. To your people and to God."

Daniel leaned back in his seat, feeling that the crowd of Vikings that awaited him now had their eyes affixed on the bishop amidst the hostile words exchanged between the two, even if they were in a foreign tongue. Daniel felt a surge of confidence in himself knowing he had numbers by his back as he stood and presented himself in a stature unfamiliar only to himself.

"Bishop, if you'll excuse me I need to be getting back to my..._convent._"

With this Daniel turned his back abruptly on the Irish and walked back towards the crowd of Vikings. O'Gara was as shocked as the rest

as he turned to the bishop for post argument guidance.

"Well that was interesting."

"I'll say, bleeding hearted scum sided with the dragon people."

O'Neill looked to O'Conner and requested his silence with an expression before looking back to Luke.

"It appears this plan may need some adjustments."

"Right. What was the plan again?"

O'Neill nodded his head over to where O'Rourke had taken a seat with his Viking entourage and drinks were passed around to each of them.

"Luke, what is so important about the Pope?" O'Gara knew when O'Neill asked such questions it led to some poetic discourse, and regretfully replied.

"What is so important about the Pope Father?"

"While people like us are about actually bringing the Word of God to the people, he unites the church under his one rule. He is our leader, our icon."

O'Gara knew the obvious statement held some sort of deeper meaning and gestured O'Neill on for extrapolation.

"You see my child, it is necessary to give the people an icon, a figure, a symbol behind which they can rally. An instrument by which they can be introduced into the faith and pour all their admiration and respect over."

O'Gara looked over to O'Rourke, entertaining the throng around him with simple words. It was an impressive sight to Luke, but the open-endedness of O'Neill's words left him wanting more of an explanation.

"Soâ€¦what does that make us?"

O'Neill also looked over to O'Rourke, growing irritated by the presence of his spiritual apprentice partaking in the joys of reciting Psalms to the heathens.

"I'm afraid the spells of the Night Fury have rendered us Pharisees at the moment. Our prophet has lost his way."

Luke managed a final glance at O'Rourke, the Vikings hanging on his every word as from memory alone he recounted a letter from St. Paul.

"What are we going to do about it Father?"

"Let the false prophet teach for now. God shall reveal his ways in time."

O'Gara decided to keep his view towards the door for the moment. Not

out of any particular interest, only in that he desired neither to look at the prophet or his fellow Pharisees. While he did not care for the dramatic tone of O'Neill's language, he was relieved at least to find that God's work was being done on Berk. The fact that it had turned into the mess that it had was an acceptable sacrifice for the redemption of many. At least he hoped it was.

* * *

><p>Hiccup never thought he would enjoy feeling blood pumping through his body quite like he did now. As Toothless caught a gust of wind and coasted on the updraft, he took a moment to feel down and rub his left leg. Skin and bone, tissue and sinew flexing and moving along with the rest of his body, warmed by the flow of blood that pulsated in and out of it with each heartbeat. He found that if he was to be dreaming, he would dream of that which he enjoyed, and found his longing for a full body stronger here than in his waking life.<p>

He took a moment to absorb the painting of Berk approaching before him in the sunset. He had had a good day testing aerial maneuvers he would work on when he woke up, and had taken the liberty of defeating the Red Death a few times in various manners. He found that a solo flight leading it in pursuit through the storm clouds was a particularly exhilarating exercise.

"Shall we take a scenic tour of the sea stacks?"

The whispering and ethereal voice that Hiccup had come to expect from Toothless gently broke the crash of wind against Hiccup's ear. Hiccup allowed himself a moment to contemplate what he wanted to do next on this day, and whether or not he should prolong it. Perhaps cue the Northern Lights for his enjoyment? He instead noticed how the sun struck the waters and stroked them with broad strands of pink and orange.

"Nah, I've got a better idea."

Hiccup clicked the tail mechanism and motioned Toothless over to the left. He thought for a moment of giving his friend the full tail fin that Hiccup had so often wished his friend had. But he knew from experience Toothless preferred to work with Hiccup, not under him when it came to flying, and Hiccup glanced back at the red fin with little grief. They coasted on another updraft as Hiccup recalled a special night two years ago, one which had he had longed for and feared for the many years prior. He soared over a village he had preferred to keep empty for the time and brought Toothless low over the tree line. Hiccup could see a tall pine in the distance, where he had nearly let Astrid fall to her death six years ago in his fear of his secret being revealed, not that it had done much to stop that anyways.

"Ohâ€|Ohâ€| Oh Damnit. Not this memory. Please anything but this one. I beg you please not now." Toothless was honest and blunt as the words nuzzled Hiccup's ear. He remembered how Toothless had joined him on this night, much to the dragon's dismay and Hiccup's embarrassment.

"Rightâ€|..Yeah it's still happening, sorry bud. Can't you just â€|.you know, leave?"

"It is not your desire. I only can do what you desire."

"I'm pretty sure I never wanted you there, at least not at that point."

"Well you flew me in there before, so obviously you did."

Hiccup blushed slightly at the recollection and struck back.

"I was riding you when we stopped, and how was I supposed to know what would happen would happen?"

"You could have made other plans, but you chose not to. You went right along with it and left me in the lurch. I had to listen to and smell everythingâ€¦.EVERYTHING for half an hour while you took your sweet time in what should be an otherwise fast exercise. Do you have any idea what that was like?"

Hiccup grew irritated with his friend's tone as he responded.

"Yeah, yeah I kind of do."

"Well I mean from your perspectiveâ€¦"

Hiccup banked Toothless to the left again and managed to get the dragon to stop his tirade as he settled the dragon into the cove. One filled with much history and many memories, though there was only one Hiccup craved to repeat at the moment given his present control of the situation. Toothless sulked onto the ground and landed, Hiccup dismounting and being pleased at feeling dirt rolling beneath the boot of his left foot.

Her dragon nowhere in sight, Astrid reclined on a rock catching the warmth of the last rays of the day's sunlight on her face. She had not yet noticed the two as the memory played itself out. Hiccup looked back to a less than thrilled Toothless.

"Ugh. I'll be beneath that tree. Just do what you need to do and let's get this over with."

The dragon jumped back towards the entrance of the cove and settled in beneath a large oak and covered his face with his tail. Hiccup approached Astrid quietly and with stealth, wanting to surprise her. He quickly placed his palms over her closed eyes and she stood up with an expected startle and laugh.

"Guess who."

"I thought I smelled Night Fury saliva."

"Keep me out of this!" Toothless called out from his resting area. Hiccup ignored the dragon and beheld himself at Astrid's beauty in the slowly fading sun. She had certainly filled in nicely the past few years. It was the start of their last perfect year together before Drago and Astrid's body had readied itself for the occasion. This last year would certainly be their best as Hiccup knew from experience. Astrid spun on her back and sat at face level with Hiccup with a smile as beautiful as he remembered.

"Fancy seeing you here."

"Fancy seeing you here."

They chuckled at their mutual sentiments. The pond of the cove glimmered in the sunset, alit with an orange fire that refused to burn and only illuminated the whole cove with the reflection upon the waters. Astrid looked down at Hiccup's leg, noticing the glimmer of metal had given way to a green pant tucked into a well fitted leather boot.

"Nice." She gestured to the rather standard pant on the rather standard leg. The one statement served to break Hiccup's illusion that this was all just a memory.

"Youâ€|you can notice that?"

Astrid smiled as she got off the rock, Hiccup taking a step back as she made room for herself.

"Of course I do." She was frank in her speech but enticing in her expression, still the charming girl Hiccup remembered. Hiccup found himself wanting to further explore this realization, even if it meant putting off the memory for a moment.

"Butâ€|but how?"

"Just because it's your memory doesn't mean you get to have all the fun silly."

Astrid pressed her hand lightly on Hiccup's chest as he backed away with a footstep, unsure where his subconscious was leading him. He collected himself from the shock of dealing with another self sentient figure in his mind and decided to get things underway.

"But does that mean there is still fun to be had?" He managed his most convincing smile against Astrid as she reciprocated.

"Well now what does that mean?" She said coyly as Hiccup knew he had regained control of the memory in some regard.

"Wellâ€|.I suppose it means I would have landed in here and you would have been sunbathing."

Astrid moved her hand up to Hiccup's mouth as he stopped from speaking his next sentence, Astrid instead taking the lead.

"And I said I wanted to talk to you about something."

Hiccup knew he was going to have to lead this self sentient memory on himself, and was resigned to play the game.

"Something you had been trying to talk to me about for months prior." Hiccup took another step back with a smile as Astrid followed, enjoying the game of cat and mouse that the memory called for.

"And I said it was a perfect time to talk about it considering how alone we were."

"Hey!" Toothless' complaint went unheard by Astrid and unnoticed by Hiccup. Hiccup began to turn right as Astrid mirrored his

steps.

"And I said it was something that was already settled. And that we could wait until later." Hiccup took the firmer tone he knew he had taken at that moment when he knew Astrid had him trapped for her own doings.

"And I said there was no point in waiting. That it was long enough."

Astrid took a larger step and forced Hiccup to lose his balance as he motioned around in haphazard ways. His feet, two real and solid feet twirled and flexed their way at awkward angles as he and Astrid danced in the open area in front of the rock where she had lain.

"And I said that we could certainly wait just a little longer, tillâ€¦you know."

Hiccup smiled as Astrid weaved left and right, Hiccup mirroring her movements as smiles came across their faces. They continued to keep each other on their toes as they covered the entire area available to them.

"And I said I was tired of waiting, and you and I both noticed the moment seemed rightâ€¦"

Astrid used her foot to cut off Hiccup's route of escape and motioned back towards the rock where she had sat, Hiccup more than willing to comply with her silent demand.

"And I remember you pushing me back against here."

"And you tried to protestâ€¦." Astrid had Hiccup where both he and she wanted to be, she falling upon him softly as Hiccup folded back against the natural curve of the rock. Toothless quietly grunted in his doze in frustration of seeing his favorite resting spot being so violated.

"I guess I did." Hiccup whispered as Astrid drew near with a kiss that quieted him for the moment, ecstasy overcoming him as blood flowed up his back and throughout his body as it stretched against the stone.

"And I told you not to worry. And I told you that it was time." Hiccup looked deeply into the skies within Astrid's bright blue eyes as he recalled his barriers slipping away, his inhibitions crumbling as a euphoria overcame his mind. He knew he had but one phrase left to complete the intricate ritual of his recollection.

"And you finally told me something. And I let go." Hiccup found his face but an inch away from Astrid's, their mutual breath ricocheting off each other as he felt Astrid's hand on his left leg, his full, natural left leg. It tingled as her fingers gently grazed their way upward as she brought her mouth close to Hiccup's ear.

"What was it?" Hiccup asked playfully as he felt Astrid's hair brush over his face, her hand drawing closer to where he urgently desired it to be.

"You can't fight this forever."

Astrid's hand stopped before where it was supposed to reach, time standing still. Hiccup closed his eyes. This wasn't right. He felt a nagging feeling at the back of his head as an unsettling situation with the same words and featuring the same woman reared itself into his subconscious.

He opened his eyes to find the sky before him. His accelerated heartbeat and pulsing blood faded, the faint recollection of a presence brushing up his leg dissipated quickly as he stood back up straight. He sighed deeply and kicked his leg outward in frustration.

Toothless on hearing the scuff of dirt and noticing the lack of words he expected looked up from his rest to find his master distraught.

"Well that took less time than I remember."

"Oh shut up." Hiccup did not care how harsh a tone he took with this figment of his imagination. He took a few steps forward and looked back at the rock where he had just moments ago been in the throngs of passion.

Why now of all times? He found himself against his desires contemplating the weight of the words that had been said. There was a waking world out there, one where he hoped he eventually could return to figure out why he was in this world of dreams and fantasy. Toothless merely snuggled back into comfort, not caring to deal with the complaints and frustrations of his master and friend.

Hiccup walked around the area where he had just danced with his love in anguish. Outside this cove and in the world of the living a group of foreigners were on his island. He didn't care much for any of them. They had all come at such a horrible time. But then there was Astrid.

He felt a nagging at the back of his mind a fear. A horrible fear he tried hard to keep down.

"I can't fight it forever." He had tried and so far succeeded in repressing the weight of the statement amidst the chaos of the ceremony, but now found it occupying his every thought.

"Why now?" He was greatly dismayed at his thoughts, anger and fear replaced the longing and love he held for his wife. He knew her better than this, he knew himself better than this. He wasn't like he was supposed to be. He had more faith in Astrid than his fears were telling him. Paranoia continued to plague him. Not Astrid. Astrid would never change like that, she was too stuck in her ways like any good Viking.

"She can't change." The vain hope was merely a whisper against the rock cliffs Hiccup leaned into, his stomach churning with fear and anger. He was surprised as the walls spoke back in an echo.

"Yes, how inconsiderate of her!"

It was an echo that came from behind him. Hiccup turned to see

watching him a young boy, clad in green with a bear skin vest, his left leg replaced by a noticeably complex metal prosthetic. Hiccup blinked to only find the boy was still there, leaning up against the same rock where he had previously been, a sarcastic scowl upon his face. The boy saw he was recognized and nodded his head.

"Hello me."

"Umâ€¦hello me?"

Hiccup took a step forward, surprised to see this younger, smaller version of himself so lackadaisically making himself comfortable despite the elder's distraught nature.

"Can I help you?" The younger Hiccup let out with a high pitched smile, not seeming overly concerned with the feelings and emotions of the older Hiccup. The elder took another cautious step forward, noticing out of the corner of his eye Toothless' absence from his resting spot.

"Umâ€¦what are Iâ€¦.you doing here?"

The younger Hiccup fixed eyes with his older self without care and responded.

"I figured I'd tag along for the journey, see where you and Astrid would be in the next few years. And might I say nicely done."

"So you were just gonnaâ€¦."

"Of course. If you were in my position-which you were at some point-wouldn't you?"

The elder Hiccup managed a scowl at the jibe. He began to understand why people were annoyed by him in his younger years.

"What do you want from me?" The elder asked sharply. The younger was quick to reply as he took a step closer to his future self, gesturing a finger at him.

"The correct question is what you want from me."

"So what do I want from myself?"

"There we go now you're getting it!"

The elder Hiccup was beginning to grow annoyed at the sarcastic tone of himself, recognizing how he had matured in recent years was the only thing that kept from slapping the annoying boy across the face. He decided he would try to outwit himself, a significant challenge he knew but one he would have to perform if he was gain some dominance over the wily youth.

"Well thenâ€¦" he threw his arms up and let them fall back to his side. "What do I want?"

The younger stepped to his side and took his time contemplating a response to the elder's frustration.

"You want...Astrid."

"Thank you for summing that up!" Hiccup grew increasingly irritated at the simple and derisive nature of his own voice, but the younger talked again before he could manage a more stinging come back.

"You want Astrid back to the way she was, back here in this cove. You want her to be the same girl we fell in love with and used to change the world. You want your sidekick, your partner, that girl who we took on one pivotal flight six years ago."

The younger Hiccup motioned a hand to his elder self before spinning it around to cover the circumference of the cover.

"You want all of this to be the way it was. Before Drago and before dad and before our little Irish friends."

The elder frowned with contempt at his younger self, daring to bring up an event he would have never known about.

"Ah! You're angry! Perfect!"

"Shut up! You don't know anything about what's going on!" The younger Hiccup was unfazed by the demand and moved closer to the elder, turning on his metal leg and moving closer.

"You're scared. Good."

Hiccup launched a punch at his younger self, only to have the sly young lad dodge it, his metal leg gripping the elder Hiccup's back leg and pushing him down to the ground with an ease neither would have expected from the youth by appearances. Before Hiccup could retaliate he felt the full weight of the metal leg on his chest, a heaviness taking over his arms and legs. He was powerless, trapped by himself.

"Imagine how she felt! How she feels now! Trapped between her life and the future!"

"Let go of me!" The elder screamed, hoping that Toothless wherever he was could come to his aid in this less than pleasant situation.

"She's not just the girl we took for a romantic flight once! Do you think that was easy for her? To give up everything she had been taught and knew and try something that radical? Did you really think she changed because we were some hot item? Come on!"

The younger pressed harder with his metal leg onto the elder's chest, both grunting in effort and pain respectively.

"What do you want!"

"I want what I want!"

"What do I want?"

"Action!"

The younger released his cold iron strain on Hiccup's ribs. He breathed heavily at the relief from the pain. The younger limped

away, the elder sitting up and desiring vengeance, but finding his lack of breath prevented him from doing so.

"Cast them all out and break her heart, keep them and break ours. The sacrifice is yours to make."

"And what about you, what difference does it make to you?" Hiccup threw the question with anger towards his younger self as he walked away towards the cove entrance. He stopped and turned.

"I'll always have the past, the future is your problem."

With that the sly green figure vanished between the rocks. Hiccup got up, a pain emanating through his chest as he tried to follow and hunt down this annoying version of himself. Not paying attention to his surroundings he found himself tripping, turning over to find the dark, stoic visage of Toothless watching over him.

"I forgot how annoying you can be at times."

Hiccup was less thrilled than usual to see the dragon, the recent events spinning in his head and the pain in his chest throbbing horribly. Hiccup sat up, the dragon curling around him and providing him a place to rest. Hiccup knew not what to say if could talk at all. He let himself fall back into the dark hide.

"On the bright side I don't have to deal withâ€" "

"I don't want to hear it." Hiccup was quite simple in his demand and it was enough to silence the dragon. He stared back towards the rock, a rock where just a few minutes ago the love of his life had been waiting so eagerly for him. A memory and only that. He had to wake up, had to confront his fears. He patted his hand on Toothless' ear, caressing it between his fingers.

"Stay with me bud."

It was all he could manage. He didn't know what to remember next, what to dream, what to do in this world of endless possibilities. The dragon purred at the relaxing touch of his master.

"Don't I always?"

Hiccup stared again at the rock, a rock which meant so much to he and Toothless. He did indeed stay with him, for better or worse.

"Yeah. Yeah you do."

"Now then again there are some things I'd rather not have been there for."

Hiccup blushed and allowed himself to fall back into the hide and its darkness. He knew he would always be with Toothless and vice versa. Then there was Astrid.

"Break her heart or yours." He mumbled beneath his breath. He held a hand up to his sore ribs, their throbbing slowly seceding. He was too tired to summon her back, too distraught to enjoy the bliss of her embrace. Too fearful to listen to what she would say. It would break his heart, and hers.

* * *

><p>Astrid could feel her eyes desperately wanting to close for eternity, but she refused to let the day end before it began. Toothless' usual morning request for flight had been enough to rouse her for the day, and the two sat on opposite sides of Hiccup as he lay motionless. Bodily aromas permeated the room amidst Hiccup's state of powerlessness. Astrid knew she would have to get her husband cleaned up for the day eventually, but the sight of her husband in such a position rendered her petrified. Valka would be back soon, but it could never be fast enough.<p>

Toothless purred as his head lay gently on Hiccup's chest, the black oval nearly covering his body. He wanted desperately for his master and friend to wake, to smile, and to fly. The dragon recalled all too well the agonizing time it had taken to wake Hiccup the last time he had laid in such a state, and deeply desired for his friend to come out of the deep sleep once more.

The sun was beginning to take its full place in the sky above Berk. O'Rourke was still asleep when Astrid had went upstairs. She had figured a long day of entertaining the interests of a pack of Viking women had left him too tired to rise at his typical early hour. He lay almost as still as Hiccup downstairs, curled up beneath a bear pelt as the night air had brought the first true blasts of winter to Berk.

Astrid gripped Hiccup's right hand firmly. He would wake up, this was an established fact and she knew this. But the sight- the pitiful sight- pained her still. She did not like the flurry of emotions the occasion brought out of her, the anguish and fear were not of her character and that infuriated her.

The Irish. It had to be them. Astrid couldn't think of any other person or persons who would be willing to do such a thing as poison Hiccup, let alone on the anniversary night. That infuriated her most of all. The fact that despite all that Hiccup had felt and all the two of them had put up with from each other in the time leading up to the ceremony, for the night to be ruined by poison was disgraceful.

She grasped Hiccup's hand with her other, both tightly holding the warm but otherwise useless appendage. She closed them together tightly, fingers wrapping around each other tightly and clasping Hiccup's hand. She bowed her head, hair falling over her face. She breathed slowly, intently. She matched hers with Toothless', who still kept his head resting gently on Hiccup's chest, his breath rolling over Hiccup's face in waves. She closed her eyes, words from a few nights ago quickly rushing to the front of her head and off her tongue.

"Our Father, who art in heavenâ€¦|."

She stopped herself as her face fell into a scowl. What was she doing? She unclasped her fingers. She couldn't do this, not to Hiccup. Even if he didn't know what she had done she was racked with guilt over it. She unclenched his hand and sat up, feeling increasingly dirty at her very presence near her husband.

She got up from her seat and went towards the door. Toothless noticing her withdrawal from the room opted to stay, not shaken by matters of faith and only interested in seeing his friend heal. Astrid creaked open the door and let herself out, feeling a need to fill her stomach and shake off her guilt. She walked downstairs to find O'Rourke still asleep. She found a slice of salmon jerky in a cabinet and with more oral force than she was used to applying ripped off a piece. The house was quiet, far quieter than she enjoyed it. No Hiccup, no Valka, and an Irishman as quiet in the real world as in the realm of sleep. She skirted around the large table of the kitchen and made her way to Daniel's side.

On a stool improvised for a night table rested Daniel's book. Its cover heavy and bound in thick dark brown leather, intricate geometric patterns adorned its surface, inlays pressed deep within the hide and still slightly glimmering from a mostly worn down and washed away gold trim. O'Rourke breathed slowly and calmly in his sleep, his slick black hair rolling over his face and obscuring his visage. Astrid ripped off another piece of jerky and picked up the book, finding it heavier than she had thought it would be. She gently placed it on the kitchen table, forcing down the rest of her jerky as she did so.

One book to unleash such a firestorm of debate, of questions, of fascination.

She turned it open to a random page in the middle. Spread out across both pages a series of well engraved and impressively written words, each letter receiving its own embellishments with great care. She traced her finger over them, knowing full well she couldn't read a single part of it. She still didn't quite grasp why the Irish spoke in Gaelic and read in Latin, but this was the least of her concerns at the moment.

A murmur came from behind her, Daniel turning in his sleep but still not awake. Weak, frail, nervous even in his sleep. Much like Hiccup in his youth, she couldn't help but make the connection.

The Irish, they had to be behind Hiccup's poisoning. This young, innocent man who lay asleep and defenseless was one of them. Astrid flipped to the back cover of the book, where a slim knife was still snuck away in the leather. Hiccup was poisoned. Poisoned by Irishmen. An Irishman was right there behind her...

She looked back up the stairs, where Hiccup laid in their bedroom a victim of Irish treachery. Where she had been deceived into insulting her faith-what little of it existed- by a sly talking Celt. She had insulted her gods and insulted Hiccup, all because she had been persuaded into taking pity on a lowly Gael. Her hand lightly stroked the leather handle of the knife, soft to her touch. Anger swelled in and out of her fingers, throbbing with blood which they so desired to spill. She let go of the blade as Daniel groaned again in his sleep, this time his eyes seeing their first slivers of daylight. He groaned out with a dry throat.

"Ohâ€|.g-good morning Astrid."

Astrid's hand fell back to her side as she turned around to see Daniel's blue eyes squinting at the sunlight coming in through the window. He pushed himself onto his side and brushed his hair away

from his face.

"Good morning Daniel." Astrid was calm in her voice, a rationality taking over her more base desires she had felt surge through her body a moment ago.

"Is-is that my bible?" O'Rourke asked innocently enough, not figuring he would ever have to wake with it not by his side, let alone to have a beautiful Viking girl pondering it over.

_A very, very beautiful Viking wife. _

O'Rourke had allowed himself his first sin of the day. He knew more would certainly follow.

"Umâ€¦yeah. I wasâ€¦uhâ€¦just looking over it." Astrid knew she had no particularly good reason for having the book in her possession, and she turned back to the page she had opened up to, her thumb saving the page.

"You can read Latin?" O'Rourke was still too tired to think correctly and let the stupid question pass through his lips as he sat up on his bed.

"Umâ€¦no. I was justâ€¦.I just wanted to look at the inside of it againâ€¦" Astrid trailed off, racking her nervous brain for a better explanation.

"Can't even wake up without Viking women asking me to read to themâ€¦."

O'Rourke was finally awake enough to manage the sarcastic remark, managing a blush to Astrid who could not hide her interest in the foreign text now that Daniel had brought it up. She took the spine of the book in her hand and turned to the deacon, whose barely pried open eyes closed in worry as Astrid approached his bed, tossing the open book onto his lap, pointing at where she had left off.

"Do you mind?"

O'Rourke took a hard swallow as Astrid pulled in next to him cross legged. She had felt guilty about her thoughts of prayer by Hiccup's side, but felt no such shame by O'Rourke's. She knew that the words, the words which had led her to such anguish and frustration could also calm her. Daniel squinted through his tired eyes at the page, focusing as much he could only on that page and not the ever tantalizing blonde haired maiden beside him.

"Umâ€¦" he took a moment to translate the Latin into Norse. " Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"

"What?"

Astrid's question was direct. The statement seemed to contradict itself, this did not soothe her nerves. O'Rourke managed a cautious look over to Astrid as he stopped reading the passage. He took a breath before moving to explain another tenant of his faith at a less

than desirable hour.

"It meansâ€¦uhâ€¦it is Jesus referring to himself as that which has come to redeem us of our sins. It is through our faithâ€¦our belief in him that we may find eternal life when we die, and so never truly die."

The answer only somewhat Astrid's somewhat simplistic question. Daniel had certainly explained what he meant, but what he meant still made no sense. How could one live and die and yet never die if he lives? She kept a stare on O'Rourke's cheek, where he kept his gaze away from her.

Was he hiding something? He was always this shy, maybe he had been planted in their house to poison Hiccup. It would certainly explain his apprehension towards being close to her and preference to be alone, outside the house for most of the time. But he wouldn't have had any time to poison Hiccup that night, and least she couldn't think of any.

O'Rourke turned briefly to face Astrid as the silence and their mutual closeness raised his adrenaline.

"Soâ€¦umâ€¦if you want me to keep reading I couldâ€¦uhâ€¦yeah."

Before Astrid could respond a heavy knocking came from the door. Her heart raised for a brief moment thinking it would be Valka, before remembering the obvious fact that there would never be any reason for Valka to knock on her own house. She got up from Daniel's side and made her way towards the door, leaving the Irishman to catch his breath from the emotionally stressful encounter, or at least he thought it to be.

She clicked down on the cold and worn metal handle and welcomed in the sunlight, squinting through her eyes to find Snotlout happy to have a response from the household.

"Snotlout?"

"Good you're up. How's Hiccup?"

"Uhâ€¦fine." Astrid noted the seeming lack of concern Snotlout genuinely had for his cousin, knowing all too well that such a tragic event could still only fulfill Snotlout's deepest desires.

"What are you doing-."

"You're little Irish friend around?" Snotlout interrupted Astrid without concern for her question.

"Uhâ€¦yeah." She took a step back from the door and gestured her hand to Daniel, who displayed both interest and fear at seeing such a large and moody Viking taking a step into the house. Astrid caught a movement out of the corner of her eye and found behind Snotlout a white robed Irishman, thick brown hair and green eyes desiring only to get on with the mutual mission he had with the Viking. The Irishman stepped into the house as well and moved around Snotlout's back. Astrid made room for his presence as O'Rourke greeted his compatriot with surprise.

"Luke?"

"Good you're up, let's go." He motioned a hand towards himself as Astrid and Daniel looked to each other in mutual confusion.

"Umâ€¦what?" O'Rourke was quick to repeat Astrid's earlier words at the sudden call to mobility.

"We want you present, there's going to be something big happening."

"Mass?" It wasn't Sunday, O'Rourke could think of no reason as to why he was being summoned. Astrid could feel Snotlout's presence had something to do with the affair and posed the question to him.

"Snotlout, what's going on?" She was very direct and simple, knowing it was the best route to take with Snotlout. The Viking phrased his words as carefully as he could, knowing Astrid's intervention risked ruining his plan.

"We'reâ€¦uhâ€¦having a contest with the Irish."

"What kind of contest?" Astrid had a bad feeling where the conversation was going. Snotlout maintained silence a moment as O'Rourke stumbled out of bed, O'Gara assisting him in getting ready.

"It's complicated."

"And which of the two of us is the smarter Snotlout?" Astrid's comment stung the Viking, but he could not respond with his typical display of force. He instead only managed

"You'll have to see it for yourself."

The two Irishmen made their way to the door, O'Gara with intent and O'Rourke with bewilderment as he was dragged by his friend outside into the risen sun. Snotlout followed and Astrid pursued, not wasting time putting on boots and being shaken into a vigorous state of mind by the feel of cold stone on her feet.

In the town square, a sizeable crowd had gathered considering the time of day. Hookfang was the only dragon visible as he stood proudly over a haphazardly assembled floor of wood. Astrid could also see Gothi on the far side of the wood, her small stature still visible through the gaps in the legs of the taller Vikings. Then, on a cliff where the town fell on a gentle slope down to the harbor below, there stood four other men clad in white robes, three the same and one embroidered in gold. Their attention quickly shifted towards Daniel as they saw his slim black robes descend the hill towards the town square. The assembled crowd put away their independent conversations and mumblings as the group descended towards the town center.

Despite a painful shock shooting up her foot from stepping on a sharp pebble, Astrid made a few leaps and caught up with Snotlout, leading the Irishmen behind him by several good paces.

"Snotloutâ€¦what is this?"

The Viking remained silent as the group parted a gathering of townsfolk who folded back in behind them, forming a ring around the two piles of wood and assembled groups. Astrid grabbed Snotlout's arm firmly, irritated at her husband's cousin's personality.

"Snotlout, answer me!"

Snotlout pulled his arm away forcefully and turned to address the woman he had once futilely swooned over.

"Astrid, this doesn't involve you." Snotlout turned towards Hookfang who bowed in respect to his master as only the most prideful and arrogant of dragons could do. Snotlout threw his arms up in the air which in turn elicited a shout from the mostly male gathering in appreciation and respect. O'Rourke and O'Gara had joined their fellow Irishmen, Daniel quite confused as to what was happening.

"Okay thenâ€¦" Snotlout settled the crowd, Astrid falling back towards a small gap close to the Irishmen, intent on getting close enough to observe them but not close enough to interact. She had seen the way the two brothers had looked at her from time to time, and was disgusted.

"People of Berk, in the temporary incapacitation of our chief we see it falls upon us to deal with matters of great concern to all of us." Snotlout spoke slowly, intently and with great confidence. Astrid decided for the moment to let Snotlout's plan play out, confident in herself that it -like all his strategic undertakings- would fall apart before him.

"That being so we must then decide on how to deal with ourâ€¦distinguished guests." The men again let loose a furious holler, Daniel shrinking back into the comforting numbers of his fellow Celts at the war cry.

"These guests who have insulted our ancestors!" Another cheer.

"Our gods!" The cheer grew louder.

"Our chief!" Louder still

"Our very way of life!"

The outburst inspired a roar out of Hookfang, the Monstrous Nightmare's long sharp teeth and deep, snarling call sending the entire group of Irishmen into a shudder as they huddled closer together. The knights held a stoic and heroic demeanor upon their face. O'Neill one of anger, Daniel one of fear. The dragon ended his call with a fierce spewing of liquid fire upon the assembled wood, igniting it in a brilliant flash of orange. The crowd took a collective step back at the sudden heat but maintained their look of blood-lust.

"If they are to stay, are they not to prove themselves? Should we not let their god show us his true power?"

It began to make sense to Astrid now. Gothi's presence only added to

the conclusion.

Damnit Snotlout...

Was all she could bring herself to think. She began to pay attention to the faces assembled around. Helga's husband and Dana's father and Friga's brother and so forth. She could see how they occasionally managed a menacing look over at Daniel. It all made sense. Snotlout made his way over to Gothi, gripping her frail arm and hoisting it upwards, along with all of Gothi's body.

"Let the gods decide their fate! Should Gothi pass through the Nightmare fire they shall be cast out immediately! Should they pass through..." He managed an annoyed and belligerent look at the group of Gaels. "â€|they may stayâ€|for now."

The crowd booed and hollered an occasional insult at the Irish as they closed in a pace before the heat of the blaze proved too much for them. Snotlout set Gothi down as the elderly woman pushed her arm back into her place with a light grunt. Older than the village itself, and still as tough as any berserker in his prime.

"Let Freya decide this for us!"

Snotlout exclaimed as he pushed Gothi forward. The elderly woman approached the still brilliant blaze with the tenacity awarded to a soothsayer of her age and station. The crowd fell silent as Gothi approached, the hopes of all the men of Berk resting on an old woman's shoulders.

She reached a tentative hand out to the blaze. Astrid couldn't help but wonder how Snotlout had put her up to this, but she supposed she could ask her afterwards, provided she survived of course. As Gothi took her first step towards the blaze, her face coming awash with sweat and illuminated by the pyre, the flames burst upwards in a spectacular fireball, sending her back with a startle. The crowd collectively reared its heads back in shock.

Gothi got up slowly and steadied herself on her old bones before turning her back on the blaze. A series of whispers quickly spread through the Viking ranks and eyes began to turn on Snotlout with worry and anger. Snotlout maintained his confidence as he gestured apathetically to the Irish. The knights looked up to O'Neill, who Astrid assumed had also played his own role in orchestrating the event as he approached the blaze with a smugness that elicited growls from the gathered Vikings.

"Yes my most honorable host, let us let God decide this."

He walked towards the blaze with hands by his side, slowly and intently. There was something about the way the Bishop carried himself that troubled Astrid, something innately wrong with his character she couldn't yet place, she only knew that her suspicions were not lessened in his presence. As O'Neill approached, not taking the tentative approach taken by Gothi, the Vikings leaned again in interest as to how the effort would result.

That result would be the same as O'Neill began a quick rush into the blaze only to be repelled by the heat and a condensed fireball. He fell back gripping his hands in anguish, the Hennessey brothers

rushing quickly to his aid with O'Gara and O'Conner keep an eye on both the Vikings and their wounded leader. Silence befell the group at seeing the representatives from both sides pushed back by the blaze.

Both Gothi and O'Neill grasped their burns fiercely and moaned in their proudest and most distinguished voices, neither wanting to appear the weaker. The fire still roared, unconquered by either side. Gradually, amidst the crackling of the wood the Vikings noticed how one of the Irishmen, one clad in black and off to the side, the one who most visibly represented their ire was doing nothing to aid his leader. Snotlout caught onto the newfound attention and devised a way to save his plan.

"You there, the man in black!" O'Rourke was startled at the direct attention by the brawny Norseman, and was slow to nod in affirmation.

"Would you care to have your turn, oh anointed book reader?"

The derisive comment brought out a renewed cheer from the Vikings and boosted their confidence. O'Rourke, inspired either by insanity or an arrogance he had not yet displayed instead approached, much to their surprise. Astrid extended an arm out to stop Daniel, perplexed by this sudden appearance of a confident and determined Irishman. She could tell this was a ruse, a façade her guest wore upon his face.

"Daniel, you don't have toâ€"

Daniel pushed her arm away as he approached the blaze, his precise and calculated walk making the other Vikings glancing at each with smiles of jest and ridicule.

"Ladies man."

"Washed up vagabond scum."

"Seducer."

The insults went unheard by Daniel one way or another as he approached the blaze, his intentions being made clear by his silent expression. He stood a few paces before it, silence befalling the crowd again as the sly, reserved and otherwise ridicule deserving Gael took a breath before the pyre, motioning a glance up to the Monstrous Nightmare that looked down upon him, teeth bared in distrust mirroring the sentiments of his master.

O'Rourke closed his eyes and focused on his breathing, slowing it to try and ease his pulsing heart. He brought his hand over his head and made the sign of the sign of the cross garnering several boos from the crowd, not that Daniel could see them in his self imposed darkness. As he crossed his chest, he whispered beneath his breath.

"And whoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

On ending the phrase, Daniel took his first steps forward. He extended his arms out to their span as he took his first step into the blaze. The Vikings leaned in again as the true object of their

fury took a second step, seemingly unfazed. Astrid blinked a few times as she bore witness. Daniel took another step, and another, the flames wrapping around his outstretched arms. Astrid stepped forward and leaped to parallel herself with Daniel outside the fire. O'Rourke kept his eyes forward, as if in the trance he normally displayed when immersed in his book.

Snotlout looked on with fear, his jaw slowly dropping as the black clad Gael kept inching towards him. The crowd stood silent, dumbfounded as the Irishman neared the opposite side of the pyre. Hookfang was as puzzled as his master as O'Rourke stepped down from the blaze, his arms falling to his side as he stumbled forwards. Astrid came to his side, fascinated the brazen display. She felt his hand, no hotter than hers.

"Daniel thatâ€¦.that wasâ€¦how did youâ€¦.how did you do that?" Astrid was the first to ask questions as a smaller crowd gathered around the Gael. O'Rourke only panted heavily, still in shock himself that his gamble of faith and confidence had paid off.

"Iâ€¦..Iâ€¦..don'tâ€¦.." O'Rourke trailed off a moment to catch his breath, the few Vikings around him eager to hear him as much as the women that had gained Daniel his reputation. O'Rourke steadied himself before looking up to the sky and exclaiming.

"Whoever believes in him shall never die!"

The Vikings looked to each other curiously, supposing the phrase to be one he used amongst their women.

Astrid found herself smiling with happiness as O'Rourke moved forward beyond the crowd to a rock to sit. Despite whatever suspicions she held and doubts she kept at the back of her mind, this was still a man who had accomplished a great feat, and a man she could say with some honesty she was glad to see alive.

Eret, Son of Eret emerged from a private place of viewing by a house and made his way over to the deacon, paying no heed to the bishop and the knights who were rubbing plants on the burns on his hands. He quietly approached from the right, out of sight from the rest of the crowd before leaping onto the wall behind Daniel and dropping down by his side.

"Most impressive there lad."

"Thank you Eret, Son of Eret."

Eret, son of Eret was greatly impressed by the consideration to his name given to him by the foreigner whom he had only met the previous day. The Vikings had gotten to talking amongst themselves and arguing as to how the deacon had accomplished the feat he had done. Eret, Son of Eret leaned in close to Daniel, and while not whispering was quiet as he asked a particular question.

"Deacon, what can you tell me about a thing called baptism?"

Astrid enjoyed the smell of crushed herbs in the house, especially when she knew they would wake her husband. Valka had returned shortly after the whole incident at the pyre and had brought more than enough of the needed ingredients to make the antidote for Hiccup. She was upstairs, administering it and giving general care to Hiccup in his motionless state. Astrid remained downstairs with Gothi, making more of the medicine and going over the morning's events over and over again in her mind. The soothsayer's hands while red and sensitive did not prohibit her from showing Astrid how to prepare to the medicine.

O'Rourke had gone out for the day as he usually did. Astrid knew he would be escorted by his usual entourage of adoring and fascinated women, but felt a small number of men would be joining those ranks. She reminded herself she would have to give Snotlout a nice punch across the face for doing what he did, but knew he was likely not the sole mind behind the endeavor. He had merely emerged as the leader of a crowd, a faceless crowd driven by fear and anger.

She couldn't blame them. To have their daughters and wives rejecting all they had been taught and hanging around a mysterious foreigner was certainly not something she would appreciate had she been in their position. As she ground some leaves firmly, she took a moment to worry for Daniel. She hoped he would be alright. Much of the village by this point knew he spent his time with his throng in the Mountain Mint fields, all it would take is a few Vikings, some mead and a couple of swordsâ€¦No. They wouldn't.

Yes they would, who was she kidding? She felt it was only a matter of time before violence broke out. If not against Daniel, then certainly against the rest of the Irishmen. She knew much of the village would be suspecting them for putting their chief in the state he was in; the fact there had not been violence yet astounded her. She had noted how the Vikings had in recent times become more willing to listen, more willing to not rush to judgment, more understanding. Hiccup's ways had brushed off on them, and it now served to be a blessing and a curse.

At the same time, they were still the Vikings she had grown up around, the same stubborn and old fashioned Vikings that just a few years ago would have never believed where the village stood now. Allied with dragons, home to an Alpha, a living and breathing example of what could happen when differences could be overcome. Now there were differences again, but who would overcome?

Daniel had made a good showing for himself, even if the other Irish were a less than commendable assortment. And so by making a good showing for himself, he had made himself a target. It would be regrettable if such a good man were to fall victim to an inconsiderate mob. Astrid contemplated heading up to the fields again, both to listen to him speak and to help defend him.

Defend him. This was what she was reduced to. She ground the herbs firmly as an outlet for her frustration. She was willing to defend an Irishman, an Irishman who was turning the people of Berk-even her-into doubters of their gods of centuries. Astrid looked over to Gothi, who was taking her time grinding herbs slowly and intently.

"G-Gothi?" The old woman continued to swirl the herbs in the mortar

as she looked up to address the woman sixty years her younger. Her silent approval of being addressed was enough to let Astrid continue.

"Why'd you do it? Why did you agree to the competition?" That fact above all else confused Astrid. Gothi was wise and non confrontational, it was out of her character to agree to such a brazen competition, especially with so much on the line. Gothi continued to grind, letting her body fall into the rhythm as she began her slow response.

"The gods desired to speak, I would listen." Astrid continued her own herb grinding as she pressed on for a better response.

"Butâ€¦but did you really think you were going to cross that blaze?" Astrid leaned over in curiosity, knowing that these past few days marked the most she had spoken with Gothi in months.

"I would cross it if that is what the gods desired." Gothi's honest yet seemingly defeatist comment only drew Astrid in further, she had to mind herself not to let her chest lean too far in lest she let it uncomfortably rest on the pumice stone in her hand.

"Soâ€¦so did you actually think would cross it?"

"It was in the god's hands, it mattered little what I thought of the matter." The comment puzzled Astrid, it gave her the impression that Gothi, she who represented the entirety of the Viking faith had given up without a fight.

"But why would the gods not will you to pass though? You are a good enough woman, better than me." Astrid disliked the modesty that overcame her, but felt it necessary to calm what she supposed to be shame emanating off of Gothi.

"The gods will what the gods will."

"But why would the gods will for another god to show its dominance?" Astrid knew that the display had shaken more than her small dose of faith in their gods. She could only imagine what Daniel's procession had done to the more pious Vikings of the village. Gothi raised her hand with the pumice stone in it to Astrid, signaling her final words.

"The gods will what they will."

The door to Hiccup's room creaked open, Astrid's optimism faded as only Valka came down the stairs.

"Astrid, would you mind giving me a hand with Hiccup, I can't lift and wash him all by myself."

Valka clasped her hands together as Astrid could tell her mother in law was exhausted both physically and emotionally. Gothi silently nodded to Astrid allowing her to break from her herbal duties to assist Valka. Astrid got up from the table, stretched, and followed Valka upstairs, closing the door behind her as she took a last look at Gothi. Defeated and still infinitely wise Gothi.

* * *

><p>"Well, that worked spectacularly."<p>

O'Gara was blunt and sarcastic in his speech as O'Neill gripped his hands in a stoic agony.

"Yes, a good showing indeed."

Matthew joined in on the ridicule as Mark and John sat by O'Neil's side, both to bolster the spirits of and tend to the wounds of the bishop. Luke paced back and forth through the warehouse, rationally working through his frustrations. He wasn't sure what he was worried about.

He wasn't sure what specific feeling of dread was wracking his thoughts, only that it made him uncomfortable. He had no reason to be. God had proven himself, the Holy Spirit had shown its power to the heathens and the event could in fact be considered a victory. Yet despite this, the morning did not rest well with O'Gara. He turned to address the bishop with more of his ever doubtful questions.

"So then, what now your holiness?" The bitterness in O'Gara's tone drew a harsh look from John; Mark looking to his brother in mutual anticipation of another brawl for their entertainment. The bishop turned slowly and with fatigue to the inquisitive knight, a response prepared.

"We let the teachings continue." O'Gara scowled at the typically brief and unsubstantial words.

"And we couldn't let them continue without risking death because why again?"

"To speak of a fire is not enough, in order for action to be taken people must see the blaze."

O'Gara squinted in confusion. He grew weary of the bishop's riddle and allusions.

"Okayâ€|.what?"

The bishop brushed the hands of his attendants aside as he gestured them to O'Gara in his usually paternalistic and prophetic way.

"We have made a demonstration to the heathens, now our prophet may have more opportunity to spread the Word. The Holy Spirit shall fall upon them now, this is assured."

Luke brought his hand over his face in frustration, holding back a groan as he continued the conversation.

"So you put us in that vulnerable position all so you could have a little miracle performed? We could have been killed. Idiot." The last word slipped out inadvertently, but Luke had no qualms about it, it was what his heart desired to say, and he was one who listened to himself quite regularly. O'Conner rose and straightened himself facing O'Gara, feeling a faithful urge to fight back in the name of his bishop.

"We would never be in any danger my child, God would not allow

this."

"Oh just like he allowed you to pass through the blaze then?" The comment seemed to have more of an impact on O'Neill than O'Gara had anticipated. Mark and Matthew stood off to the side as they watched the battle of wills unfold.

"That wasâ€|merely God calling forth the proper disciple to show His will. Myâ€|.rejection, merely God using me to call forth he who shall do the teaching." O'Neill took solace in his own sentence. O'Gara pressed the issue forward.

"So you knew you would be rejected by the fire?"

"I knowâ€|.only what God desires."

"So Godâ€|" O'Gara gestured to O'Neill's hands. "desires you to be in pain then it seems." Luke managed a smirk at the cunning statement, though only briefly. O'Conner moved forward with strength in his step.

"Alright that's enough out of you!" Luke presented an un-intimidated face to his fellow knight as the two eyed each other up and down, surmising their chances in another brawl.

"Is it brother?" Luke got close to O'Conner's face with a smug smile, only slightly perturbed at having to confront his fellow Irishman again.

"I think we've heard just about enough of your doubts, Thomas." O'Conner growled into O'Gara's face, grimaces taking over the mouths of both.

"And I suppose I am a Thomas for not wanting to see all of us die by a Viking blade?" O'Gara was still smug in his tone of voice, taking a mild pleasure in annoying the thorn in his side of nearly a decade.

"You are a Thomasâ€|because you lack faithâ€|brother."

O'Gara stepped back as his fist launched an uppercut into John's jaw, startling the knight backwards a moment before he recovered and charged O'Gara, who deflected O'Conner's first punch but was unable to stop a powerful second one from landing on his stomach. The two stepped apart into a good sparring distance, each regaining their composure.

"Oh I lack faith do I?" The words left O'Gara feeling deeply insulted. He may not be the most pious or dogmatic of the knights, but he refused to let anyone question his devotion to God. He threw a fake punch at O'Conner pulling him in close before landing a blow to his nose and another to his abdomen while he was stunned. O'Conner recovered and in a surprising move used his weight to tackle O'Gara to the ground.

Luke kept his arms over his face amidst a furious series of blows by O'Conner, absorbing the shock that would have otherwise be directed towards his face. The battle had lost its sense of honor, now a furious pummeling was all that awaited either combatant. O'Gara flipped O'Conner off of him and managed to get on top, landing

several formidable blows to John's face before a knee to Luke's groin made him quickly get off as a pulsing soreness flowed through the area. He hunched over in pain, positioning his way towards the door. He couldn't fight now. One cheap shot was all it took to disable the proud knight.

"Alright alright you've had your fun!" Matthew stepped in between the two with his arms outstretched. Luke stumbled towards the doorway with the intent to leave. O'Conner breathed heavily as he eyed his rival with a longing to continue the engagement. Mark and O'Neill merely stayed where they were, unfazed by the events. Luke pointed in O'Conner direction.

"Faith? More than you know!"

Luke opened and slammed the door behind him as he walked out into the afternoon sun, searching for a soft place to lie down and recover. Inside, O'Conner found a place near the wall where he sat back down, a scowl on his face that he directed towards Matthew for interrupting their fight.

"Well I couldn't just let you kill him now in the middle of all this now could I?" The Hennessey was swift in his retort at the stare John gave him. "Right Your Holiness?"

Matthew gestured towards the bishop, who maintained silence as he stared at the door. He broke his gaze at it to look down at his hands, blistered, red, and burned. God would make this right, he had faith in that.

* * *

><p>Toothless' relaxed, deep breathing synchronized with Hiccup as the two lay in the sun, just beginning its descent over Berk. Hiccup had it stay where it was for the time being, enjoying the way the warm but not too overpowering beams of sunlight absorbed into Toothless' hide, warming Hiccup in turn. The island was deserted save for the two of them. Toothless purred in his rest as Hiccup looked out over to the ocean, glittering to the horizons with the perpetually falling light. Hiccup sighed, releasing the heat he held within him amidst the embrace of his friend.<p>

"You're troubled."

"No, what gave you that impression?" Hiccup felt no qualm about keeping a sarcastic tone with his friend. They were alone and at ease. They could talk to each other only as friends could.

"Because when you're troubled you finally shut up." Hiccup accepted the comment gracefully, he had been told by many that he was very talkative at times, he did not figure Toothless had ever minded. Then again, this was not Toothless, only his imagination.

"Fair enough." He extended a hand to his behind his friend's ear and gave it a scratch. He looked back out over the cliff they sat upon into the still sun, never moving, always where it should be.

"So what troubles you?" Toothless let out as he adjusted himself, his breathing shifting rhythm as he did so. Hiccup sat quiet a moment, wondering the same question himself.

"Iâ€¦.I don't know."

"You're also a terrible liar if I haven't said so before."

Hiccup nodded his head in appreciation of the honesty, continuing to contemplate the dragon's question. He laid back deeper into Toothless' hide, inhaling deeply in sync with the beast.

"When am I gonna wake up Toothless?" He sighed as he asked. The dragon shifted his weight again.

"Soon. Is that all you're troubled about?" The dragon's question contained no judgment, only curiosity. Hiccup continued to scratch beneath the dragon's jaw.

"No." Hiccup paused as he contemplated his own worries and fears. "It's what happens after I wake up."

"Oh yes, life can be such a hassle at times." Hiccup flicked the dragon's ear plate in playful amusement at the sarcastic statement before resuming scratching.

"Yeah. It can."

The dragon rolled on his back, allowing Hiccup a good angle to scratch the full extent of his lower jaw. He purred in appreciation, managing a smile out of Hiccup's reflective face.

"Ohhhh yeaaahhhhâ€¦|.."

Hiccup used his second hand and devoted his full effort to tickling the warm black scales that overlapped to form the smooth skin like surface of his friend.

"But there are upsides to it."

"Ohhhhhhâ€¦|"

Toothless lost himself in the relief of being scratched too much to respond to Hiccup immediately. The two rolled across the ground, the dragon vying for a better position to be scratched, Hiccup struggling to keep up with the rolling ton of reptilian flesh. This kept up a minute before the two righted themselves into independent sitting positions, both reinvigorated by the brief roll. Hiccup sighed as a quick surge in physical activity shook him out of the warm trance he had been in earlier as he looked over to Toothless who looked out into the horizon. Hiccup leaned back against an oak.

"And downsides." Hiccup sighed again as he relaxed as much as he could against the jagged bark of the oak.

"Like what?" Toothless asked simply.

"Ughâ€¦|.things." The smile Hiccup had briefly worn faded as his head sunk lower. Toothless moved his head close to his friend, not anticipating a scratch but in an effort to console.

"Like?"

Hiccup rested his hand on top of Toothless' head, letting it be limp against the oval as though it were a table.

"Toothless?"

"Yes?"

"Am Iâ€¦a good Alpha?" Toothless pushed his head in closer to his friend at hearing the depressing question.

"What makes you think you aren't?" Hiccup pressed his head on top of Toothless', embracing the warmth and support from his mental companion.

"Iâ€¦..I don'tknâ€¦"

"Yes you do."

"Then why would you ask in the first place?"

"Because you won't admit it."

"Admit what?"

"Admit what you know."

Hiccup lifted his hand up from Toothless' warm forehead, running it through his air as he arced his back against the tree.

"Iâ€¦.."

"Yesâ€¦.."

"I am Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, chief of Berk." Referring to himself by his full title again felt odd. Whenever he had said it before it was always to other people. He had never had the opportunity to simply refer to himself by such a name. Chief of Berk. It tickled his narcissism and scratched at his modesty.

"Andâ€¦..?"

"I have the heart of a chief." Toothless purred as he moved his head closer to Hiccup again.

"And the soul of a dragon." The reptile calmly added. It brought a smile to Hiccup's face, faint but creeping out of the corners of his mouth.

"And so what will you do?" Toothless asked plainly. Hiccup took a moment to consider, memories of his father quickly racing around his mind.

"A chiefâ€¦protects his own." The echoes of his father's memory resonated through Hiccup as he leaned into Toothless, absorbing his silent support.

"I protect my own. And I protect you."

"Hey, remember who's who in the Alpha world."

Hiccup flicked Toothless' ear jokingly before turning his attention back out to the ocean.

"I will protect you Toothless."

"Implying I need to be protected?" The dragon jested with his usual pride.

"It's not the Christians. They're not as understanding of dragons as I am."

"And you're so understanding?"

Hiccup looked over to the dragon, curious at the statement.

"Is that doubt I hear?"

"Only if you doubt yourself." Toothless got up from his resting spot and walked forward, Hiccup's arm that had rested on his head falling to the ground. Hiccup could feel the air growing colder and quickly. The oak behind rapidly chilled. Hiccup looked behind himself to find it forming into a block of ice.

"Oh no." A twisted memory began to manifest itself before Hiccup. "Oh no."

"And if you doubt yourself you can doubt me." Toothless walked slowly ahead of Hiccup, his tone deepening. Hiccup needed to bring a good attitude back to his friend.

"Toothless come on, I would never doubt you." Hiccup raised his hand, his voice trembling with uncertainty. Toothless turned his head away from Hiccup.

"You do doubt yourself, and you do doubt me." The dragon walked to the edge of cliff, his tail spines the only part of him that seemed to address Hiccup directly.

"Toothless "

"After all, I am but a dragon, unholy offspring of lightning and death and so forth. I've killed thousands of people over the past few decades alone. I've killed your villagers, I've killed your friends "

"Toothless come on "

"I killed your father."

Hiccup lowered his arm, pained at the statement. This wasn't happening, this was a dream. One from which he still couldn't wake up.

"No, no Toothless you didn't kill "

The dragon turned to Hiccup, his pupils constricted and reptilian. He approached slowly, each paw moving slowly and strategically.

"I'm a monster. You know this. I killed your father."

"Toothless stop this!" Hiccup was becoming panicked, his surroundings covered in ice and snow, a faint roar of battle in the distance.

"You hate me for it!"

"Toothless!"

"You hate all of us!"

"No!" Hiccup stood himself up against the ice pressed on his back, looking for a way out, ice behind him, a belligerent dragon in front of him. Trapped.

"You want nothing more than to see me punished. To see all of us punished! Dead!"

"Toothless! What are you doing? Come on bud this isn't you." Hiccup was paralyzed with fear as the dark mass of scales and rage approached him with malice.

"You could have taken your sword and killed me right then and there, and he would still be alive!"

"Toothless come on, snap out of it!"

"You were weak! You wouldn't kill a dragon!" A faint glimmer of purple began to build in the back of the dragon's throat.

"Toothless!"

"You hate me!"

"No!"

"I'm a monster!" The glow at the back of Toothless' throat grew bigger. Hiccup pressed himself as far back against the ice as he could.

"You don't have the nerve to harm anyone!"

"Toothless stop!"

"You can't hurt me even if you wanted to!"

"Toothless!"

"You want nothing more than to see all dragons punished for what we did!" The light in the dragons throat was becoming white hot and large.

"Toothless stop!"

"You're too weak to know what you want!"

"TOOTHLESS!"

"And this is what you deserve!"

Hiccup closed his eyes, fear and panic overwhelming him. His legs gave out from under him as a brilliant flame exploded before his closed eyes. With hesitation, he opened his eyes slowly. Laying before him, scorched on its side, its wounds cauterized by its own singed blood lay the lifeless body of Astrid.

"Noâ€|." Hiccup scrambled off his legs -as devoid of feeling as they were- and wrapped himself over the body. Toothless had vanished, the ice fading back into the woodlands of Berk.

"Astridâ€|" Hiccup brushed a hand over her face, blood dripping from the sides of her lips."Astridâ€|noâ€|.come on Astridâ€|.Astrid." He pressed his head to hers. This was a dream. He had to wake up.
"Astridâ€|."

He held her tightly towards him, her body growing colder by the moment. He tried desperately for his own body heat to warm her, perhaps to bring her back to life, or at least he vainly hoped. Nothing but cold, cold death and blood, both cauterized and coagulated.

"This is what I deserveâ€|" He sobbed. He locked his forehead with hers, still as soft as when she was living. A tear fell down his face and onto hers to no reaction.

"Wake up."

* * *

><p>"Wake up." A simple phrase, but all Astrid could bring herself to say. The antidote having been applied, she, Valka and Daniel could only wait, no different than their position before the antidote had arrived. Toothless had curled up at the foot of the bed, knowing that merely standing over Hiccup would not wake his friend. Valka and Astrid sat on the opposite sides. Daniel had returned early for the day, hoping that showing his support for his host would keep him in both said host's and his tribe's good graces.<p>

Astrid knew that when Hiccup woke he would probably scold Snotlout for his part in the little demonstration that morning. That would be a whole other business entirely. Word of the astounding feat had quickly spread throughout the entire village, and Astrid knew how much some admired, and others feared it. She had seen the worry and hatred in some of the faces that morning. The fear and the blood-lust were unmistakable.

"Wake up." She whispered again as she clasped Hiccup's hand. He would wake up, she knew this. There was no denying it. But what then? She looked back at Daniel, the so called "fire-walker." She knew what Hiccup thought of the whole matter. He would want to throw the Irish out the first chance he got, especially when he arrived to the same conclusion she had about his poisoning. She gripped his hand tighter the more she thought about it.

Irish Bastards had poisoned her husband. They would pay for this.

Then there was Daniel. When the formal accusation was made against the Irish Astrid knew the more close-minded of the villagers would spare none of them, especially not the one they held in the most contempt. And then his followers. If they tried to protect him, defend him—there could be a full scale civil war. It was really quite impressive how much could go wrong when Hiccup fell asleep for a few days.

"So Daniel—heard you made quite an impression this morning."

Valka broke the tense silence of the room with a cheerful tone. She knew as well as anyone else Hiccup would wake up, and so there was no reason to be in too worried a state of mind. Daniel looked up, broken from the joys of meditation and focused on Valka, not poor, beautiful Astrid.

"Uh—yeah. It was—um—nothing really." Valka could see through the false modesty quite easily and smiled at the failed endeavor.

"Oh now, you know it's not just everyday someone just walks through the fire of a Monstrous Nightmare." She waved a hand at the deacon, who couldn't help but smile at the admiration.

"Well—it's uh—whatever God wills—I suppose."

Astrid clenched Hiccup's hand tighter again. The gods will what they will. Gothi's statement had stuck with her the past couple of hours. The ambiguity frustrated her, its implications humbled her. The gods will what they will, God wills what he wills. She looked down to Toothless, spawn of Thor and bringer of death. Until six years ago when a young awkward boy had given him a fish. Hundreds of years of Vikings teachings and life vanished then in the course of a few weeks, and Astrid had some pride for playing a part in it. War had left them and the dragons had joined them. Together they were stronger and more formidable than they ever were divided.

Now a single Irish youth had divided Berk again. His companions did not help much at all, and their punishment for their actions against Hiccup...Astrid would see carried out slowly and painfully- both her and Hiccup would watch and take joy in their suffering.

"Yes, I suppose."

Astrid was broken out of her thoughts by Valka's response. She had not paid much attention to Daniel in her time around him, and her absence the last few days had certainly stopped her from falling into his allure. Astrid wondered what she thought of the whole issue. She had lived a life of exclusion from humans for twenty years, away from the sacred idols, away from the festivals, away from the sacrifices. She had never bothered to ask Valka if she had kept up with such traditions amongst the dragons.

"Heard you got quite the following too." Valka smiled at the deacon, who would have rather not been in conversation at the moment.

"Umm—yes. If you can call it that." The deacon laughed at the comment. To have gone from the majority of one's company being aggressive Celtic men to enthralled and fascinated Norse women had

been a mostly pleasant change of scenery for him.

"He hasn't been bringing any of them back here, has he Astrid?" Valka winked at her daughter in law. Her time away from humans had certainly meant her perceptions of appropriate conversation had faded amidst her loneliness, a trait she was still to get back. She looked up at Valka, and glanced back at O'Rourke who had blushed at the question.

"Not that I know of." She smiled back at Valka. O'Rourke certainly could wow the ladies with his mysterious demeanor and ability to speak endlessly on spiritual matters, but she knew he would never make anything more than a friendly glance in any of their directions.

"No, none at all." O'Rourke added quietly, keeping his gaze away from Astrid and out the window.

"Ah well I'm sure you'll find that special one out of the lot soon enough."

Valka tried to get the deacon's attention again, she desired desperately to converse and keep away from the awkward silence their mutual company brought, finding awkward conversation more appropriate.

"No, we're not people of my profession have sworn oaths to celibacy.-Daniel tried to make some sort of motion with his hands to awkwardly convey his sentiment- So we don't...um...don't...do...umm...yeah."

Daniel's confession of his fate brought a smirk of chagrin to his face as he noticed Astrid out of the corner of his eye. He had allowed himself too many indulgences under the roof of his host, and knew he would pay for such sins in time. But for the present, he would continue to bask in the mental satisfaction he had come to allow himself. He would keep his vows and his honor like any good Irishman.

At least that's what he kept telling himself.

The last several days had tried Daniel's patience with himself to its breaking point. Every night he had fallen asleep with Astrid occupying the bed a short ways away from his own downstairs. Every night. Every night he found his usual method of reciting psalms had given way to the adolescent fantasies he had though himself to have proudly conquered amidst his years of dedication to his faith. Every night. Every night he found himself losing control, the devil abducting his thoughts and his body desiring a pleasure he had always thought himself a superior to.

"Uh, so be it." Valka's lack of interest in Daniel's aspiration to purity allowed the deacon to close himself off from conversation for the time being. He could withdraw into the corner, clasp his hands together and pray, or at least try.

"Reminds me of when he was just a babe. He slept so peacefully back then."

Valka touched her hand to Hiccup's cheek, reminiscing about the brief

few months of bliss she had had in married life before Cloudjumper had come and changed everything. In the end it had been for the better, mostly. Still, a part of Valka's heart ached both then and now to have been there during Hiccup's growing up. She could have done so much, protected him, nurtured him, maybe helped him become the Viking everyone had wanted him to be.

No. It had been better the way it was. Granted there had been heartache and longing between the two of them, but had Valka been there for Hiccup he may never have become the man that he was, and the man he had been that night he had shot down a Night Fury. He would not have been the man who had done what she never could have, fight for a cause she had decided was better to give up on than pursue. He would have never been the man that had won the heart of the Hofferson's young daughter, one who could possibly fulfill Valka's desire for grandchildren eventually. She could only hope.

"So I've heard." Astrid whispered softly, her hand having never left its bond with Hiccup's. Silence befell the group again. Astrid thought about how the same quiet had fallen on the room a few days ago, when Daniel had sat where Valka did now. Where she had felt his hands gently roll over hers in sympathy, where she had experienced a calm she had not known for a long time. And yet this calm had left her with nothing but anger and resentment towards the man who had given it to her, who gave such a peace of mind and sense of spiritual adventure to her village.

Irish Bastards had poisoned her husband. She could not forget this. At the same time, an Irish bastard lived under her roof and protection, and despite the uncertainty and mistrust she felt towards Daniel, much the way Snotlout and the others did, she would protect him.

She looked to Hiccup, color returning to his face, his breathing less shallow and his chest growing more robust with each passing minute. Her husband, her beloved. A man who had once been disowned by his father and reviled by the village for his willingness to be different, to try something new, to understand.

A man who was once a boy she had hated, reviled. Whom she had repeatedly joined in on beatings up of for his un-Vikingness. The most un-Viking like Viking in the history of Vikings, married and loved by the most Viking like Viking in the history of Vikings. A boy who had changed everything at the cost of a leg and a father. What would Daniel cost Berk? What would Berk cost Daniel?

It frustrated Astrid to split her worry between Hiccup and Daniel. One who she would take an axe for, the other might be taking an axe very soon. She knew she was fretting over nothing. It wasn't something she could or had to be concerned about, not when she had Hiccup. Hiccup and only Hiccup. Hiccup and Berk, and her dragon, and her village, and her gods. Her gods, whatever they willed. She clenched Hiccup's hand tightly. She did not know what the gods willed, and this angered her. The gods were toying with her, the past week and a half had been nothing but stress and angst. Why would the gods want to punish her? This couldn't have been for the one prayer, could it? She could onlyâ€œ

"Mm..mmm..hhhh..rid." A mumbling, dry and incoherent arose from the

back of Hiccup's throat. Astrid held his hand even more firmly, nearly crushing his fingers.

"Hiccup?" A single green eye opened for a brief moment before closing. Valka closed in over her son in anticipation. The eye batted open again, this time its pupil adjusting to the light well enough to stay open, the other eye followed suit.

"Asssâ€¦.trâ€¦" Astrid reached over to the nightstand and grabbed a pouch of water, lifting it gently to Hiccup's throat as he swallowed a small gulp, Valka lifting the back of his head to make it easier for him.

"Hiccup?" Astrid let out again, louder and more filled with emotion than her normal tone of voice, not that she cared.

"Astrid." Hiccup muttered out completely, turning his face slowly to catch a full view of his wife.

Toothless, on hearing the words of his master had risen and enthusiastically jumped onto the bed, forcing Astrid to lose her grip on Hiccup's hand and Valka to back away from his head. He steadied his paws carefully so as not to crush Hiccup's own appendages as he snuggled his face into that of his friend, crooning as he did so.

"Toothlessâ€¦.Toothlessâ€¦hi." Hiccup said, using up all his breath and putting himself in an upright position.

"Son!" Valka found a way past the blockade of Toothless' head to wrap her arms around Hiccup, who slowly brought up his left arm and placed it around his mother's back. Despite being swamped with admiration by the two, Hiccup kept his face directed to Astrid.

"Astridâ€¦you'reâ€¦you'reâ€¦"

Astrid stopped Hiccup from his question as she joined in the communal embrace. Hiccup raised his right arm and with both of the important women in his life at his side relaxed back into reality. Daniel stayed in the shadow of the corner, appreciative of the moment but not daring to interfere. Hiccup placed his head over Astrid's shoulder as she leaned into him. Though overjoyed, his weary and confused mind only wanted to complete his earlier question with a faint whisper.

"Alive."

10. Fresh Blood

****Fresh is always best...****

* * *

><p>Despite the fierce winds that pummeled the island and knocked the heat out of any living organism, the village rapidly turned out to the chief's house on hearing word that he had awoken. None save the infants and infirm wasted time inside as they huddled around the front door, eagerly calling for their chief and hoping to see him in

good spirits. The hollers and cheers at the news reverberated inside the house where Astrid led Hiccup downstairs slowly.<p>

Hiccup's head spun wildly, a fuzzy sense of self guided his every movement. He repeatedly lost control over his left leg, as artificial as he remembered and so resulting in Astrid and Toothless having to stay on both his sides to prop him up. Valka had made her way to the door, eager to open it up and give the villagers what they desired.

"Well come on, we've all waited long enough haven't we?" Valka joked towards her son, who managed a slight smile at the remark amidst his fatigue. While lifted from the binds of coma, his body was malnourished and weak.

"Just a smile and wave and then we'll get you all settled in for the night.- Astrid remarked quietly to her husband. -No dramatic flair right now, okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

Hiccup grunted in his exhaustion. He was still unsure as to why he had been asleep for so long, and had to continually remind himself that he was finally awake from his pleasant dreams and wretched nightmares.

His left hand firmly dug into Toothless' head as the dragon supported his master towards the door. Hiccup batted his eyes in fatigue, recalling with difficulty the soft ethereal tone of his best friend as he had comforted him, and the aggressive roar that had frightened him so recently.

His right arm was swung around Astrid's neck, hardly an imposition for the strong Viking woman. She was alive, she was with him, she was his. All was at least right with the world in that regard. He wanted nothing more than to live out his dreams with her, if only he could function on his own at the moment.

A creak on the stairs behind him reminded Hiccup there was another presence in his home, a foreign one that had taken him several minutes to recall the name of. A foreign presence draped in black robes with a long main of black hair to compliment it. Daniel made his way to the foot of the stairs and glided over to the kitchen table, touching his bible to comfort him as he stammered for the appropriate words. Hiccup was slowly remembering certain aspects of this Irishman, but not enough to form a strong opinion, at least not yet.

"Soâ€¦I should justâ€¦umâ€¦head out the back then? Right?"

Astrid brought Hiccup close to the door and stopped, turning her head as much as she could to address the question.

"Well there's no reason for you to."

"Well you know it's just, well...this is a big moment and I'm not the mostâ€¦loved in the village right now."

"Trust me, your fan girls will be as happy to see you as they will be to see him." She gestured with her head to her husband.

"Am I missing something here?" Hiccup grumbled out, failing to recall what made the Irishman so popular.

"I'll explain when you're feeling better." Astrid replied to her husband.

"So I'll just umâ€¦"

"Get over here." Astrid cut off Daniel's desperation for the right words and motioned him over towards them, Hiccup looking over to his wife puzzled but not desiring to question much in his tired state.

"Well it's a family affairâ€¦"

"As long as you are under this roof you are considered family."

Astrid surprised herself at the words. Just earlier that morning she had contemplated slitting the deacon's throat in his sleep, now he was an unofficial Haddock. The day had begun with contemplations of murder, it was ending with a gesture of friendship. Just another day on Berk.

The deacon made his way forward letting his fingers slip from his bible as he neared the group; Valka not caring for the brief delay as the crowd outside sensed footsteps on the other side of the door and clamored for a view of their chieftain.

"Well then, ready are we?"

"As I'll ever be."

Hiccup let out as he raised his head and put on the best attempt at a smile his weary mouth could manage. Valka acknowledged the silent cue and opened up the door, the falling daylight the first thing to greet Hiccup before he was flooded by the sonic wave of cheering from the mass of villagers.

"Hail the chief!"

"Long live the chief!"

Hiccup lifted his left arm off of Toothless' supporting head and waved to the crowd which elicited another burst of applause. Smile and wave, all he really had to do.

"Well I'm glad to see you all too."

Hiccup managed to assert amidst the clapping and rejoice of the village. The sentiment for him was short lived. From far behind the edges of the crowd a man in a white robe with gold trim and flanked by three well built Celts approached with reptilian smiles on their faces.

O'Rourke's heart sunk at the sight of his ethnic brethren. He knew indisputably that whenever they confronted the chief it led to disaster. He also had a nagging feeling at the back of his mind that his host's misfortune may have been at their hands. He slipped past

his host's back and off to the side around the crowd, rushing to intercept them before they could cause trouble. A few in the crowd, mostly the deacon's followers managed a passing glance to see where the object of their respect was going, but mostly kept their stares affixed on their living and healthy chief.

"Hail the chief!"

O'Rourke rushed to confront the bishop, who only continued his smile at seeing his spiritual apprentice.

"Deacon, isn't it a pleasant occasion?" The bishop let out in Gaelic.

"Uh father you really shouldn't be here this is aâ€¦uhâ€¦" Daniel trailed off as O'Neill brushed past him, O'Conner shoving Daniel aside. The deacon ignored the usual lack of respect and raced to catch up with O'Neill.

"Father with all due respect I don't think you would be particularly welcome here at this time, this is a very importantâ€¦"

Daniel stopped as O'Neill did the same, the bishop turning to Daniel with his usual air of calm and confidence.

"My child, we have only come to pay our respects to our host, would you deny us this simple request to humble ourselves?"

"Yes but father the people here are less thanâ€¦"

"It is nothing we can't handle." O'Conner interjected as his forward movement spurned on the others towards the crowd, O'Rourke trailing behind with worry and curiosity as to why O'Gara was not with the other knights.

A few in the crowd began to turn around in sensing the Irish approach. Cheers turned to mumbles as Astrid and Valka noticed the group near, O'Rourke noticeably cautious as he trailed behind them. Toothless let out a faint growl at the foreigners, knowing that the ones in white robes were not as pleasant as the one in the black robe. Hiccup took a moment to put together from a shattered and fatigued memory just who the people were. His blood began to simmer as he recalled.

"Chief Hiccup! A pleasure to see you've recovered."

O'Neill's loud proclamation was enough to draw the full attention of the crowd which Daniel had snuck back into. Dragons from nearby had taken positions on rooftops and outside the periphery of the crowd. Toothless informed them to hold their ground for the moment despite a few grumbled protests.

"Uhâ€¦..Oâ€¦.Neill right? Hiccup gestured his left hand again vaguely in the direction of the Irish, quickly collecting unpleasant memories of unpleasant encounters with the group.

"Yes Chief Hiccup, and may I say you are looking quite well today!"

Daniel placed his palm to his head in frustration and worry. "Oh God

help us."

Several Vikings began to step towards the Irishmen, the knights forming a triangle of defense around the bishop with O'Conner in front and the brothers at the tips. Such an action only enticed more Vikings to break away from the crowd and circle the group of Gaels, O'Rourke backing up and hiding amidst several of his female followers.

"You've got a lot of nerve coming around here Southern scumâ€|"

"Celtic vagabonds..."

"Irish womanizing bastardsâ€|."

"Bet they poisoned him..."

"Probably worked some magic with all that burning stuff..."

Rumors and murmurs spread quickly through the assembled Norsemen as they closed in. Daniel, not willing to bear the thought of violence breaking out between the groups and seeing his fellow Christians injured stepped forward from his safety amidst the bosoms of several large Norsewomen. He maneuvered his way to the front of the Vikings, trying to keep an arms span between the two groups.

"Lads, lads please this is all just a-"

"Out of the way hot stuff." A Viking pushed Daniel aside with minimal effort, an insult to Daniel's strength and a waste of the Viking's power as the Norse and Irish closed in.

"What's going on?" Hiccup managed into Astrid's ear as he saw the Gael that lived under his roof tossed to the ground.

"I'll explain later." Was all Astrid could manage, torn between letting Hiccup rely solely on Toothless for support and assisting in stopping the violence and letting guests of Berk be killed by an angry mob.

Eret, son of Eret stepped out from a group of women and much like Daniel put himself between the two groups, holding one hand up to his Viking comrades and extending another to the deacon to help him up.

"Alright lads settle yourselves now. No need to get rough we can allâ€"

"Traitor!"

"Sympathizer!"

"Conspirator!"

The insults were hurled furiously at Eret, Son of Eret who propped up his chest and pushed himself into the face of Snotlout, who again emerged as a true mob leader.

"You dare insult my honor?"

"You have no honor to defend such scum!"

"It is honorable to defend the weak, not that you'd know anything about that!"

In a nearby field of clover a resting Rumblehorn named Skullcrusher took good advantage of its draconic sense of hearing to pick up on a confrontation entailing his master. It was quick to hoist its heavy body from the ground and set a course for its master's side.

Meanwhile, Snotlout had taken Eret, Son of Eret's insult quite personally and had pushed him hard backwards, Daniel barely able to catch and hold him upright as Eret, Son of Eret recovered and righted himself. The Viking crowds cheered on the fight, one with support for Daniel and Eret, Son of Eret, the other for Snotlout.

"You think just because you live here a year you can insult me like that."

"I've still got more time spent in Midgard than an anxious punk like yourself!"

"You traitor! You're just tagging along so you can finally have a chance with this little fishbone's ladies!"

Snotlout extended his arms and looked behind himself to gain a jeering applause from his supporters. Hiccup and Astrid looked on at the fight indifferently, Hiccup too tired to be of much assistance and Astrid too fearful of showing her true colors to the village in such a manner.

"I am not a traitor, nor are any of this man's followers." He pointed back to Daniel, hoping to guarantee the safety of his new friend and teacher.

Snotlout stepped forward towards the group again, his followers taking a collective step behind him.

"And what of them? These Celtic vermin who've insulted our chief? Perhaps have tried to kill him?" Snotlout raised his arm again to garner another cheer from his supporters.

"What's this about trying to kill me?" Hiccup whispered to Astrid.

"I'll explain later." She responded, eyes fixed on the argument between Eret, Son of Eret and Snotlout.

"We know nothing of why the chief is ailed! Do not make such accusations!" Eret, Son of Eret fired back at Snotlout, knowing he was putting himself in a dangerous position. To defend Daniel was one thing, the other Irishman he trusted less so.

"They are not accusations they are the truth!" Snotlout proclaimed as he stepped forward again. His gaze fixed on Daniel, he advanced. Eret, Son of Eret stepped in Snotlout's path to defend Daniel.

"Out of my way!"

"No! I won't let you hurt this man!"

With this Eret, Son of Eret struck Snotlout quickly across the jaw, sending the sturdy Viking back a pace as Daniel kept his distance. The village looked on as the two began a duel of fists, exchanging mutually painful blows. O'Neill and his entourage by this time had taken up a quite safe distance away from the mob of Vikings and anticipated having to make a break for it at any moment.

Daniel kept an eye on his followers, who were mostly gathered in their own cluster as they watched the fight. He wasn't sure whether or not to get involved himself. He knew the Vikings valued strength and prowess in physical combat and Daniel knew such traits were not with him. He decided it was better to let a fake aura of strength surround him than to throw a punch and remove all doubt.

Eret, Son of Eret threw another jab at Snotlout, only to have it caught and his arm twisted as Snotlout kicked him to the ground. Before he could get on top of Eret, Son of Eret however, Skullcrusher's roar deafened the sky as the mammoth green combination of shield's that comprised the dragon's scales settled down near his master, snarling at his opponent.

Snotlout got up quickly and backed off Eret, Son of Eret, not seeking confrontation with the large and more than capable beast. Daniel inched forward, hoping to help his friend off the ground. His advances were however only met with hostility from Skullcrusher, who advanced quickly near his master apprehensive that a stranger was closing in on him at the same time.

"Daniel!" Was exclaimed by many in the various groups, even Astrid found herself muttering it under her breath with fear. The deacon, by this time on his knees and approaching his protector found himself cowering to the side in fear as the large dragon approached.

"Hey! Hey, hey, hey lad settle down." Eret, Son of Eret extended a hand up from his supine position and stopped the Rumblehorn before it could properly charge Daniel.

"Hey he won't hurt you." Nobody was sure whether or not Eret, Son of Eret was speaking to the dragon or the deacon as he placed a firm hand on Skullcrusher's head, pulling himself up off the ground and tending to a deep scratch on his arm. Eret, Son of Eret then addressed O'Rourke directly as he stretched the dragon's back.

"Oh, right deacon this is Skullcrusher, he's really quite friendly." Eret, Son of Eret patted the dragon on its horn to calm it. Daniel, sensing tension in the moment that had to be relived approached cautiously on his feet.

"Daniel!" The call came from O'Neill, fearing the worst to come to his apprentice as he approached the pulsing plates of Skullcrusher. Daniel, remembering to a week before when a Night Fury had begged him for scraps from a table tentatively extended his hand towards the horn of the beast.

"Daniel!" Again came from O'Neill's mouth, not that it was heard by any. The deacon finally managed a full, complete outstretched palm to the beast, more confident at that moment than he had been a week

ago. Skullcrusher, his master's own hand on him for reassurance, embraced Daniel's palm as the deacon smiled at the warm, scaly touch.

"Is he doing what I think he'sâ€" "

"I'm afraid so." O'Neill responded to Matthew's implication. He tugged at the cloaks of the other knights to make their final withdraw away from the Chief's house as darkness began to envelop Berk.

"I'm afraid so."

* * *

><p>Evening prayers and reflections gave way to gossip, jests, boasts and worries amongst the four Irishmen as night befell them. It had been a very long day for all of them. They at least had finally done away with contact with the Vikings; having departed the great hall after a paltry and quick supper, the death stares of burly Vikings finally proving to overwhelm them. They all lay wrapped in thin blankets on their own sides of the warehouse, the second night of fierce cold in a row proving more than enough to keep them all individually shivering. Though none turned to the other, they took turns speaking in short phrases and quips.<p>

"Well, that was certainly...weird." Matthew said, turning from his side to gaze at the gray stone roof above him.

"A fountain of wisdom as always brother." Mark replied.

"You know there is supposed to be a fountain of wisdom on an island in Wexford Bay, we should see if we can visit it when we get back.

"Sounds like a plan." The brothers agreed to another fantasy of a quest upon return to their nonexistent homes; only the vague protection offered by Ireland's island status gave them any kind of place to call their own.

"Chasing trolls again are we?" The Bishop groaned amidst his lack of sleep to the brothers, inseparable and indivisible as always.

"Trolls exist! They steal your socks!"

"Yet only the left ones."

"Yeah, what's with that?"

The two brothers exchanged tidbits and anecdotes they had heard about trolls a moment before Matthew redirected the conversation to the bishop.

"And that fountain exists Bishop, you'll see."

"I'm sure I will my child, I'm sure I will.

The conversation dropped at the bishop's words. The four Irishmen stared at their own sections of ceiling another moment, the howl of

approaching winter winds gently shaking the exterior walls.

"So what now?" Mark asked to the assembled, intent to follow someone but with no intention to lead.

"Well your holiness, what is next?" Matthew added.

O'Neill sighed at the question, himself unsure. The day's events had taken a great mental toll on him, and a slightly physical one as well. He kept his hands gripped close together, both to keep warm and to ease their tenderness at being scathed by the earlier blaze. His intention to help create an icon for the village to rally around had certainly played out the way he had intended. At the same time, an imprinted memory of the deacon prancing through the fire where he had failed left him feeling discouraged.

Then there was the last momentous occasion of the day, which had shocked him more than Daniel passing over the fire. His deacon, trusted apprentice in the spiritual arts had actually touched one of the beasts, calmed it, petted it.

Petted it.

The very memory was revolting in everything it implied. O'Neill didn't mind that Daniel had lived under the roof of the Night Fury, figuring he would have known better to keep near the beast. He had underestimated the naiveté of the youth. To be so comfortable, so at ease with the enemy, a vicious and unmerciful enemy that had caused all of them- including Daniel himself- so much pain.

How could he? Daniel knew as well as any of them the capabilities of the beasts, their merciless nature and lust for human blood, that of fair Irish maidens in particular. It was insulting, unsanitary, unholy.

Blasphemous

O'Neill began to grip his burns tighter at the thought. What he had assumed to have been a perfectly viable plan was falling apart before him. If only he was younger, more appealing, he would have done it himself. Instead he had to rely on the efforts of a shy young deacon no more a man than a boy. And while such a figure was certainly useable in spreading the Word, he was only of use to the bishop provided he remembered that was his job, while at the same time not knowing of such a job in the first place.

Manufacturing a messiah is hard work, but O'Neill at least had hoped his own would have experienced enough, learned enough, absorbed enough from the bishop to carry out the work he was trained for in the appropriate manner. Everything O'Neill had put his hopes behind had turned his back on his faith to simply to be friends with Vikings.

And their dragons.

Unacceptable.

"Next, my childâ€¦" O'Neill trailed off, still puzzled by his next course of action.

"There is no nextâ€|only an ending."

"Sounds good to me, I do enjoy endings."

"Same."

The knights agreed and turned to their respective pieces of wall, a desire and capacity for sleep finally overcoming them. Before O'Neill could join them in making himself comfortable, Mark broke the silence with a final question.

"Hey?"

"Yeah?"

"Where the hell's O'Gara?"

* * *

><p>Unsure of where else to turn it would make sense for O'Gara to turn to drink to console himself. The morning's pains from fighting with John had mostly subsided, the fear of being lynched by a mob of angry Norsemen had not.<p>

He had hidden in the shadows of the village and on the outskirts of the forest for much of the day, only emerging from hiding as darkness had befallen the island and a confrontation again started by O'Neill and the other knights had been resolved. From his vantage point on a cliff looking over the village O'Gara had a good view of the occasion.

The fact that the chief had survived and was now recovering from O'Neill's attempt at poisoning made O'Gara grateful and understandably worried.

"Only a matter of time." He whispered to himself in Gaelic.

_Only a matter of time. _

He knew if he was the Vikings-and the chief especially- that O'Gara and company would be high on the list of suspects for the chief's illness. No grown man was stupid enough to eat Nightshade on his own, so poisoning would certainly be suspected.

Oh God what had he let himself get roped into?

As his mind started to think about ropes, he found two rope like arms curve around his back, having worked their way towards him sneaking through the shadows of the great hall.

"Hey there."

The more Luke thought about it, he could probably quickly marry Ruffnut and perhaps save his skin by the act of union, even if he would be married to a Viking who struck him every chance she had.

"Hey there yourself." O'Gara managed a slightly coy and playful demeanor. It really made no sense for him to anymore focus on winning Ruffnut's affections. She probably hated him, much like everyone else

on the island. Not that he minded terribly, a hateful marriage was still better than death.

Probably.

He looked up to find Ruffnut staring down at him over his seat.

God these Viking women_ are_ tall.

"So then, good thing about the chief thâ€œ"

O'Gara was dismayed but not surprised to find himself being slapped across the face, at this point numb due to its recent encounters withâ€œ|well everyone. He was less surprised still to find himself quickly brought into her warm if salmon scented embrace a moment for a passionate kiss. It went unbroken for several seconds, and instead of it being disturbed through Ruffnut's notable use of abrupt endings to passion, it was instead the opening doors of the hall that warranted the separation.

Removed from his hoard of followers save Eret, Son of Eret, Daniel tried to keep himself behind his defender as he entered, knowing that the earlier showing that evening likely left more than a few vengeful Vikings in the village. The deacon noticed his compatriot locking lips with what he knew to be a less than desirable Viking girl, and moved to free O'Gara from his situation. Eret, Son of Eret protested mildly, but put little up of a fight. He knew that this one Irishman had freed him from Ruffnut's advances for a week now, and that was good enough for Eret, Son of Eret.

"Luke! I haven't seen you all day!"

O'Rourke greeted his friend, who was more than relieved to have someone understanding to talk to for the first time that day. Eret, Son of Eret who Luke had surmised to be another of the deacon's followers took a seat across and away from Ruffnut, still not taking any chances around his stalker and worshipper.

"Daniel, good showing today." O'Gara lifted his tankard up to the deacon as he took a seat.

"Hey there firewalker."

Ruffnut sent towards the deacon with a hint of flirtation. Daniel, though he at one point in his life would have ducked under the table at such a string of words had encountered enough of them from other Viking girls to hold his ground and continue his conversation with Luke.

"Thank you Luke, butâ€œ|why did I have to do that?"

Luke absorbed the question a moment and readied a response, knowing to phrase it carefully. He liked Daniel and respected what he was doing, but knew he couldn't be trusted with sensitive information.

"Wellâ€œ|.you see the chief's cousin had come to us in the middle of the night, slightly laden down with mead and had started insulting us. I tried reasoning with him but all he did was punch me in the face and challenge me to another duel."

Luke rubbed the bridge of his nose gently, Daniel saw through the torchlight a slight ring of purple around it.

"Instead, the bishop spoke with the cousin and organized our little morning event. I guess he thought a little demonstration of God's power over the heathens would serve us all well."

Luke looked to Eret, Son of Eret with a regretful face, not caring much what Ruffnut thought of his words.

"Not thatâ€¦not that I mean that in a badâ€¦"

"It's alright lad." Eret, Son of Eret interjected. O'Gara continued, reassured he was in polite company.

"Soâ€¦.that was pretty much it." O'Gara ended his statement abruptly as Ruffnut placed her head on his shoulder. He took an arm and rubbed it through her oily hair, making a mental note to wash it afterwards.

"Butâ€¦why would the bishop put you all in such a risky position? And me? If I hadn't come along that mob probably would haveâ€¦" O'Rourke gestured with his hand across his neck to a conclusion the group collectively understood.

"Yesâ€¦.-O'Gara bowed his head in understanding, unsettled as it brushed Ruffnut's cheek. -But you did come along, so I guess it worked out alright."

"Aye that he did!" Eret, Son of Eret gave the deacon a forceful slap on the back, sending Daniel several inches forward to absorb the shock of the impact.

"Yesâ€¦.yes I did." O'Rourke let out with a weak air of pride, a feeling he had rarely had to contend with before arriving on Berk.

"Ah don't be so modest firewalker, that was pretty cool." Ruffnut let out with a whisper, which seemed to shake Daniel more than Eret, Son of Eret's slap on the back a moment ago. He still maintained his composure though and responded.

"Please- please, it really has nothing to do with me. It's all in God's hands."

"And he certainly showed his hand today." Eret, Son of Eret interjected again. O'Gara turned his attention to the Viking, who he had seen earlier take quite a beating in the deacon's defense. Whose dragon he had seen the deacon calm and pet. The supposed baptismal candidate, the one for whom O'Gara took the sword blow that was courting a Viking girl.

"Eret, son of Eret, right?" O'Gara asked.

"Aye that's right, and you are whom my little Irish friend?"

"Luke O'Gara." Luke extended his hand to Eret, Son of Eret and the two shook in a sign of respect.

"That was quite a show you put on today Eret, Son of Eret."

"Oh it was nothing really.- Eret, Son of Eret displayed modesty for once as he leaned back in his seat to stretch. -I couldn't just sit by and let the firewalker get filleted by a mob now could I? He's much too important to have such a fate befall him."

O'Rourke smiled at the show of solidarity from his supporter. Eret, Son of Eret had told him several stories of his vagabond lifestyle as a dragon trader until a year ago, and the two had bonded over their mutual distaste for a life in constant movement and trial. Eret, Son of Eret had comforted the deacon with tales of his uneasy first few weeks on Berk. He had assured the deacon that if a supporter of an enemy of Berk could be accepted, so could a wily Irishman.

"Important is he?" O'Gara asked. He knew O'Rourke had a following, but the amount of those who genuinely showed interest in the Word and those who were just along for the ride was still to be determined. Eret, Son of Eret appeared to be in the former category.

"Oh yes, it isn't every day someone like him comes along."

"And why is that?" O'Gara decided he would learn for certain where Eret, Son of Eret held his loyalties. He had nothing to do, and a possible ally to gain. Eret, Son of Eret took a moment to collect his thoughts.

"It's rare when you have someone who can do so much, can say so much, can be so much to so many. You may not have had a chance to see it, but what this man can do, the way the villagers listen, swoon around him, it's something special. I can't quite describe it, but just because I can't do that doesn't mean I can't appreciate it."

"And so then why do you follow him?" Luke felt it was a slightly stupid question. He knew O'Rourke was a good man, probably better than himself, but he wanted to understand his appeal to the Vikings. It had to be more than his charming Irish good looks, as though there were such a thing as non charming Irish looks.

"Iâ€¦I guess Iâ€¦I want to be a part of that. To be a part of somethingâ€¦bigger. Something that this man here could show me how to be a part of."

O'Rourke blushed slightly at the compliment as O'Gara kept a strong eye on Eret, Son of Eret. The Norseman seemed to have let his emotional guard down as he quieted himself. O'Gara was genuinely surprised at the show of solidarity the Viking had with Daniel, and found the answer satisfactory.

"Plus he gets along with the dragons just fine." Eret, Son of Eret spoke up again, reaffirming his boastful attitude as he propped up his chest with a smile. Daniel managed a slight smile amidst the prideful surge next to him.

"Yeah, they're alright."

O'Gara did not move his face, but silently absorbed the shock of the small phrase. This was the second time he had heard Daniel speak positively about the dragons. This time, it hit O'Gara harder than it

had a few nights ago. On his high cliff vantage point he had born witness to O'Rourke as he had settled the Rumblehorn earlier that day. He had seen the impressed state of some of the villagers, and the frustration on the faces of his fellow Irishmen. The worry, the fear, the awe, the betrayal.

In a way, O'Gara felt that same betrayal. He had spent much of his life bathing in the blood of dragons amidst a flurry of glorious engagements. He had always come out on top, but could never return to the way things had been before each battle. Each encounter had meant another scar, another loss of a knight, another civilian caught in the flames. And here on Berk, they were pets. It was unsettling at its best, infuriating at its worst. And O'Rourke, the only friend he had left of his group of knights had cast his lot in with them.

"Alright?"

"Wellâ€¦|certainly better than the ones back home."

O'Rourke managed weakly, knowing discussing such matters was a delicate situation with one of his fellow Celts. O'Gara could hear the tentative tone in O'Rourke's voice, the worry and concern were as profound in him as they were with Luke. The knight found himself caught between two less than desirable situations. Return to the bishop, he'd probably be quickly on the receiving edge of a Viking axe. Or he could join with his friend and still probably be at the receiving end of a Viking axe. He nodded his head and gestured to the deacon with his hand lightly.

"Go on."

* * *

><p>Sleep. O'Gara needed it and lots of it. That would have to wait for now. A long night of listening to the deacon and Eret, Son of Eret combined with carefully courting Ruffnut had left him quite drained. Had he had one more tankard of mead, Ruffnut would have physically drained him as well.<p>

Despite the still fairly illustrious color of his white robe, Luke dodged in and out of the shadows of the village as he made his way back down to the harbor. Daniel's dictation had done a great deal to ease his nerves, at least about the various large reptiles that darted in and out of Luke's way as he descended through the village. He no longer ducked furiously at a Nadder head, and even found himself smiling a few times at the wayward Terrible Terror. Monstrous Nightmares were still a matter of concern for him at the moment, but he did plenty to keep out of their way.

He needed sea air and a conversation. He needed to talk with the bishop, needed to try and make him see reason. They may be a prime target for the Viking's wrath, but Luke held out a vague hope in the back of his mind that O'Neill could still listen to reason, or as reasonable as abandoning centuries of hatred and warfare could be. He had seen the look of defeat on the bishop's face yesterday when Daniel had extended his palm to Skullcrusher. If Luke could just explain to the bishop, provide him with a different viewpoint, perhaps he could keep his head after all.

As he approached the docks, he was surprised to see the bishop was in fact out and talking with a sailor. While Luke moved swiftly through the open to avoid being viewed for too long, he was taken by more surprise to see Matthew at O'Neill's side, also talking to the sailor. Matthew didn't speak Norse.

The sailor spoke Gaelic.

Relief and interest surged through O'Gara. Another Irishman? Another Irish ship? Infinite joy! His modest walk turned into a full sprint as his worn down boots lightly pummeled the docks as he closed in on the group.

"Hey there he is!" Matthew called out to Luke with a wave as he closed in. The sailor was tall, sporting short black hair and draped in a tunic and pants of assorted beige colors.

"Up late with the Viking girl were we lad?" Matthew jibed. O'Gara dismissed the uncreative joke, recalling enough of the night to know nothing of a serious nature had happened. Thank God.

"And good morning to you as well brother." O'Gara turned to the bishop.

"Father, who is this now?" The sailor extended his hand in welcome.

"Braden MacAfee. Trader and explorer of the North. You are?"

"Luke O'Gara, knight and servant of his Holiness." O'Gara gestured to the bishop, whom he still needed to desperately discuss draconic matters with.

"Yes I was just discussing with his Holiness your tragic situation, many a valuable knight lost I hear."

"Yes, a shame that." Matthew interjected impatiently.

"And your business here, Trader MacAfee?" O'Gara inquired.

"Oh, I'm quite a regular around these parts. When my ship found this island two years ago I discovered they had the most incredible surplus of weapons and other such accessories available to trade. I take it back to the homeland both for scrap and to help in our own littleâ€|dragon problem."

The statement raised O'Neill's brow, evidence to O'Gara that the two had not been talking long.

"Andâ€|these dragons here do not bother you?" The Bishop asked with caution.

"Oh nonsense!- MacAfee exclaimed, as if considering the question a joke. -The dragons here are far more peaceful than the ones back home. And since these people do not fight with them, I can take their weapons back home for our own fight. It really works out well for everyone."

"And these Berkians, do they know this is what you do?" O'Gara questioned, more interested in the trader's dishonest tactics than

his complacency with the dragons.

"Oh of course not! Have you seen the way they interact with the beasts? One of them rides a Night Fury for crying out loud! That's why half of my takeaway from here is usually scrap metal... makes it seem less conspicuous."

Trader MacAfee closed in to whisper to the other Irishmen, not that it mattered as they were the only ones around who spoke Gaelic.

"Plus they think I'm actually from the Faroe Islands where there is peace as well. As far as you three are concerned, I'm a Norseman named Sven who trades in metal for a series of saddle making blacksmiths."

"So you bring weapons home to fight the beasts, but have no qualms in trading with those who ride them and tame them?" O'Neill asked the trader inquisitively, feeling less and less comfortable with this new Celt by the minute.

"They get rid of their metal and make money, I get rid of the metal and make money, they live in peace, we fight to make peace, everybody wins."

"Butâ€|but how can you do business with these heathens? These demon riders?" O'Neill's perceptions of a united Irish front against the dragons was crumbling before him, O'Gara decided his own views of the matter could wait till another time.

"They aren't demons here are they?" MacAfee gestured to a group of Nadders flying peacefully overhead. "As long as they're at peace, business is good. And I like good business."

The trader's lack of overt hatred for the reptilian demons that plagued Ireland troubled O'Neill greatly. While O'Gara was interested that another fellow Irishman held a less than hateful view of the creatures, the manner by which he had reached the conclusion he found to be a less than honorable one. O'Neill swallowed his desire to scold the fellow Gael for his collaboration with the enemy and instead moved to more pressing matters.

"Yesâ€|.wellâ€|good business is good I suppose. Speaking of businessâ€|We have a need to leave this island and with some haste. Are you travelling back to Ireland soon?"

"As soon as I get my trading done, should be a day or two."

The three other Irish were relieved for varying reasons at the news, and cracked mutual smiles.

"And so when you are done with this we will be able to depart with you I trust?"

Trader MacAfee placed an arm behind his head, not exactly thrilled about taking on extra passengers amidst his cargo and calculated the extra provisions he would need.

"Wellâ€|.I suppose I'd have to lower my count of metal and make room for extra suppliesâ€|If you're willing to let me have a stopover at

Hopeless to account for that then yes I suppose I can fit all you lads."

"Wonderful." O'Neill was terse in the word, as if not really caring for its meaning.

O'Gara was relieved at the news, but worried instead of the future. Just a few more days. He had to lay low for a few more days and then he could escape. Escape Ruffnut, escape the angry mobs, escape the beasts.

Escape the beasts, the beasts he had wanted to talk to O'Neill about. The beasts about which he felt a gradual change of heart. He could escape this peace, and return to war. His knightly duties could go on to be fulfilled, he could return and fight for his homeland, fight for all the fair maidens and innocent villagers tormented by the vile creatures. He could die there, or die on Berk. Either way it would be at the whims of dragons.

* * *

><p>Sleep. For the first time in days Astrid had had a good one. Granted it was awoken as usual at dawn by Toothless demanding flight, but to be in Hiccup's embrace again as she awoke was comfort enough for her. She knew it was slightly in bad taste to request such a quick return to normalcy considering he had only woken from a coma that afternoon, but her desire to be held by her love who had brushed so close to death was overpowering.<p>

Not that Hiccup had complained that much. Once the bed sheets were changed and everyone was certain he would keep down his first solid food in days, he had been quick to retire back to sleep, not even caring to ask much about the confrontation that erupted during his viewing to the village.

Despite a modest protest from Astrid for Hiccup to stay in bed for their mutual comfort, he had considered himself recovered enough to get right back into the daily routine with Toothless. Valka had pulled Cloudjumper out from his own slumber and tagged along to look after Hiccup just in case. Astrid had instead opted to sleep in for the day, reveling in the feeling of a rejuvenating slumber.

Her own flight with Stormfly had started late in the morning and been mostly kept to the perimeter of the island. She guessed Hiccup had gone for an extra long flight with Toothless and Valka. She could understand Hiccup's pent up desire to fly and to get away. She knew Valka would probably start discussing what she at least knew of the recent goings on of the village with Hiccup, but she knew that it would fall on herself alone to give her husband the true story. The full story. It worried her.

She looked down on the village below her, alive with energy and brimming with anticipation. She knew that Snotlout and company would start hounding Hiccup the moment he returned to dispose of the Irish and in a violent manner. Not that she could argue much against that. While she had no solid proof, the circumstantial evidence against the Irish was certainly strong enough to warrant accusations and executions. And there were plenty of accusations to go around as Snotlout had pointed out yesterday.

Then there was Eret, Son of Eret. His defense of Daniel yesterday had certainly been a noble one, but by extending a plea for mercy against the rest of the Irish he had made himself a target. And then there was Daniel, poor Daniel. As equal a target and unfairly so. Astrid couldn't bring herself to accuse Daniel of being in the same lot as the rest of the Irish. At the same time convincing the village-especially Hiccup- of this fact would be a challenge. Mobs and vengeful murder survivors are usually hard to reason with after all

But Hiccup was Hiccup. A man who had tamed a Night Fury and convinced Vikings to give up their centuries old war. Surely he would listen to reason, it was what he led his life by, an incorruptible pillar of logic and analysis.

Until Drago.

Astrid had sensed a great change in Hiccup after those few fateful days. It wasn't just losing his father. It was losing an ideal.

The ideal of reason.

She still remembered when Stoick had gripped Hiccup on the shoulders firmly, fear spread across his face for the first time Astrid had ever seen.

"Men who kill without reason cannot be reasoned with." She whispered into the wind.

And then there was Hiccup, the ideologue, the arbiter and peacemaker. He had tried reason, tried to make sense of the madman. And it had cost him a father. She could see how it had hurt him, changed him. He was no longer resolute in his faith in reason. If he couldn't reason to a man about dragons, the one thing that had brought him acceptance in the world, what good could reason serve him now? Why bother reasoning with any group of people that had tried to kill him?

She would have to talk to her husband carefully, with intent. With reason. She would have to reason with a man who wouldn't want to be reasoned with. Not now. Not with the spiritual future of the village in jeopardy, with the ways of his ancestors, of his father so dearly threatened.

As she started to pass over the mountain she could see down in the fields as usual the man who had placed this future in such peril. Draped as always in black and surrounded by what Astrid assumed to be his biggest throng yet Daniel was again the great center of attention. Hiccup wasn't back yet, and Astrid decided to take in another lecture from the great unifier and divider. Stormfly swooped down, taking a rest in the mountain mint and rolling in ecstasy. Astrid noticed how a few other dragons had taken a similar position. Daniel appeared to show a comfortable disposition around them, though this became more flustered as Astrid approached.

"How's Hiccup doing?"

"Is he alright?"

"Did he do anything to help?" One villager gestured to Daniel, who was as surprised as Astrid at the implication.

"Uhâ€|no. He's just out for a morning flight. He should be back soon."

Daniel acknowledged Astrid's presence with a nod as the group turned back from the arrival of the chief's wife back to their teacher.

"Umâ€|yes. What were we talking about again?" Daniel asked, apparently losing focus in Astrid's presence.

"You were saying something about a man named Caesar." Eret, Son of Eret said, keeping true to his defense and respect of Daniel.

"Ohâ€|uh...yes right. Ummâ€|" Daniel moved his hand over his bible, trying to regain his place. Finding it, he cleared his throat and spoke.

"And he said unto them, Whose is the image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then said he unto them, "Therefore render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things which are God's."

The crowd absorbed the words a moment before Eret, Son of Eret brought up a question.

"And what is God's?" It was a simple question, but one that took Daniel several moments to contemplate an answer for.

"Well...I suppose on a grand scale you could say that everything is God's, all of the world and everything within it. But it is here that Jesus says that while all may be God's, we must differentiate between how we spend our material lives and our spiritual lives. While we may live here in Midgard, we must make time to give proper thanks and praise to God and not be totally wound up in our earthly pleasures."

O'Rourke looked up to the crowd, hoping his answer would be well received. It was only met with further interest and questions, the next being posed by Astrid.

"And how are we to give thanks and praise?"

She wanted to ask in an innocent manner, but let the comment go with a hint of hostility. Being in the presence of Daniel's throng was reminding her of the difficult nature of relating the past several days to Hiccup, and much of that respective chaos would be because of the man she inquired. Daniel absorbed the question again and responded.

"Wellâ€|I guess if you were to narrow it down to one specific eventâ€|.I suppose Mass would be the most common way weâ€|"

"What?"

"Mass of what?" Daniel raised his hand and settled his audience.

"What I was performing with my fellow Irishmen the day after we arrived, that is called Mass. It is when we read from the scriptures, sing praise, and eat the Eucharist ofâ€"

"What?"

"Uh?"

"It's a feast?"

Daniel again raised his hands to settle the multitude, this time to little avail as they talked amongst themselves with questions. Astrid began to recall the event Daniel had described, where she had felt the same puzzlement and where she had first heard the deacon speak. She remembered enough to feel confident in speaking up, hoping her voice would compel the other villagers to listen.

"It is not a feastâ€|" She began, Daniel looking to her with relief and admiration for various qualities, both spiritual and physical. "â€|It is where the Christians consume what is perceived as the body and blood of the Jesus man."

She motioned with her arms to Daniel who nodded, impressed that Astrid had remembered his soft spoken words. The crowd looked to Daniel in confusion and recited Hiccup's earlier question about the ritual.

"You're cannibals?"

"Who'd have thought!"

"No wonder the other don't trustâ€"

"No! No, no!- Astrid raised her voice, looking to Eret, Son of Eret for support, which he gave with an affirmed nod. -It is only bread and wine which isâ€|" She racked her brain to remember what Daniel had said last week about the occasion.

"Infused with the Holy Spirit- He gestured back out to the crowd that turned their view back to him -that special part of the trinity. It is through such intervention that such basic material objects become a part of God himself, and through its consumption we recall Jesus' last night before his crucifixion and the sacrifice he made for all of us so that we may find eternal life."

Daniel took a moment to breath, having used up all his air in his impassioned declaration of faith. The crowd was settled and relieved at learning the real and less disturbing truth of the ritual and looked amongst themselves a moment. Eret, Son of Eret emerged as their leader in their collective question.

"Can we perform it?"

Daniel looked to his guard and newly acquired friend with a tentativeness Eret, Son of Eret had not expected.

"Wellâ€|.uhâ€|really only priests and above can fully perform the Eucharist. I am merely a deacon so Iâ€"

"But you are a Christian are you not?"

"Iâ€|uhâ€|well yes butâ€""

"So then why can't you perform the ritual?" Eret, Son of Eret asked innocently, unsure as to why the deacon was so reluctant to take part in this aspect of his faith, one he had spoken about so passionately a moment ago.

"Wellâ€|Iâ€|.uhâ€|." Daniel trailed off as he looked at the assembled crowd, who stared back at him with Eret, Son of Eret's same sense of confusion. Was their great teacher not all that he was cracked up to be? Daniel looked to Astrid, also inquisitive. Not her. He couldn't afford to look a fool before her, or any more a fool than he already was.

"Iâ€|guess I can." Daniel said, ignoring the rituals of the past and focusing only on his standing here before the Vikings. "But I'll need bread andâ€|uh wine"

The Vikings looked amongst themselves, hoping some of them had brought the necessary provisions. Helga raised her hand as she dug through a bag she had brought with her, apparently expecting a long day.

"I've got some bread."

Daniel nodded to her kindly as he went to take the modest sized loaf from her. Still, there was the need for wine as there always is. Being a rarity in such a far Northern climate, the Vikings found themselves stumped. Astrid instead looked to Stormfly, lying peacefully in the bliss of the mint. She did have some alcohol with herâ€|it couldn't that much the difference could it?

"I've got some ciderâ€|.if that'll work." Astrid motioned over to Stormfly, the Vikings looked to Daniel for guidance. The Irishman stammered for a moment. Was it sacrilege? Yes. Could he still illustrate a point? Also yes.

"Iâ€|suppose."

Astrid was quick to accept the words and made her way to the dragon, dragging out a small yak skin she kept for her pleasure when out flying. She knew she shouldn't drink and fly, but sometimes it helped on those long nights away from Berk, especially when without Hiccup. She handed the skin to Daniel, who had been in the process of tearing up the bread and reciting Latin over it much to the villagers enjoyment. They had agreed it was a funny sounding language, but a still interesting one to hear. Astrid waited for the deacon to pause in his words before handing him the yak skin. The deacon opened it and took a smell, his face contorting with a pleasant surprise as he looked back up to Astrid.

"I thought you said this was cider."

"It is." Astrid said plainly, wondering why Daniel would question such a fact. Did the Irish drink a different kind of cider on their island?

"Smell it." Daniel moved the yak skin back to Astrid, who took it

with interest. Had the cider gone bad? She brought the opening of the skin up to her mouth, finding not the scent of cider, but a distinctly fruity and piercing aroma. One she had only smelled a few times before but could still recognize.

Wine.

"Iâ€¦I don'tâ€¦I don't remember packing that."

She handed the skin back to Daniel who received it appreciatively. Had she accidentally packed wine instead of cider? Did they even have any wine in their house? The only recent time she could remember consuming wine had been with Hiccup and Valka at Snoggletog last year. She had never held a particular care for the drink. How did it get into her cider? She shook her head at such questions as Daniel motioned the crowd towards him as he recited more Latin.

Eret, Son of Eret was closest to Daniel as he poured a small portion of the wine onto a scrap of bread. Daniel performed the sign of the cross over it as Eret, Son of Eret looked on inquisitively. Daniel motioned for Eret, Son of Eret to kneel, as he did Daniel presented the scrap to his mouth. Tension took over the moment as the two neared. Astrid stood over to the side, her stomach uneasy at the sight.

"Eret, Son of Eretâ€¦" Daniel stopped a moment, contemplating his words carefully as a light wind passed over the field. "May the body of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve your soul for eternal life. Amen."

Daniel placed the wine soaked bread into Eret, son of Eret's mouth. A brief moment of eye contact between the two instructed Eret, Son of Eret to move off to the side as another villager stepped forward and kneeled. Astrid walked around to the far back of the crowd, letting them proceed in good order as they were processed by the deacon.

Hiccup wouldn't like this. Not at all. She bit the inside of her cheek to relieve her frustration. This was an abandonment of everything the village had been based upon, the very fabric that held it together being undone by a piece of bread. She stopped biting as she felt the first few droplets of blood seep out of her cheek.

Could she break this to Hiccup? More importantly could she break this to him without him immediately wanting to take his sword to Daniel for this? Thisâ€¦blasphemy. She was bearing witness to a crowd of blasphemers.

Her prayer. Gods damn her she was a blasphemer too. She felt rage surge within her as the various villagers processed, seemingly with joy. How could they? How could she? She looked down the mountain to the village, a village that was changing. She had led the ladies here in the first place, she had led Eret, Son of Eret here. This was her fault. All her fault. If she hadn't done what she had done she could have let the mob take care of Daniel and all the others. The problem would be solved by itself. She wouldn't have to face the guilt, the shame.

"Astrid?" She looked back to the call from the Celt, the way to him

open as the other Vikings retook their seats.

"Would-You youâ€¦like to receive the Eucharist?"

Daniel asked with a slight apprehension in his tone. It had been the most he had ever asked of Astrid, if he had less self control he would have asked for more. Astrid looked to him, still as welcoming and seemingly at peace with himself as ever. She approached slowly, quickly trying to decide what she was doing.

She wanted to punch him straight across the jaw. How dare he do this to her? Make her doubt herself in such a way, doubt Hiccup, doubt their bond together. At the same time, the gazes of the Vikings present looked to her for leadership, carefully analyzing her every move. She was the wife of the chief, her actions would in turn reflect on him. She drew closer, switching between desires for violence, for respect, and for peace. Why did the others have to keep looking at her? It just made everything more stressful than it needed to be. She neared closer still.

Why did Daniel have to do this? She could just walk away right now. She didn't have to do this. Her lack of action could mean at least a neutral solution to the situation. She looked to Daniel, his left hand open and his right holding a soggy piece of bread, coated in a wine she never knew she had with her. She looked into his eyes, the same color as hers, as knowledgeable about the repercussions of her actions as she was. She stood an arm's length from him, exchanging wisps of breath.

"I won't kneelâ€¦.butâ€¦"

She swallowed as she orchestrated the words. She did not need them, her face enough a signal to Daniel to raise the bread to her mouth. This was it. She breathed as she opened her mouth. What was she doing? No turning back. Could she turn back? She looked again to Daniel, who kept a calm face as a slightly trembling hand made its way to her mouth. So calm, at peace. A peace she desired in her life, a peace felt by those around her. She wanted a piece of this peace, a piece of bread.

Out of all the times Astrid had tasted wine, she was certain that this was the first time she had actually enjoyed it.

11. Revelations

***"You can't handle the truth!"**

* * *

><p>After several days of slumbering idleness, it was a relief for both Hiccup and Toothless to be in the air again. Real air. Hiccup knew this was no longer a dream, the beast beneath him only his closest friend and not some demented impersonation of his subconscious. The air, his friend, his mother flying beside him was all real.<p>

The pair of riders had flown in mostly silence for much of the morning, never once stopping or landing anyplace. Toothless' pent up energy would warrant no such thing as the Night Fury rolled and dived

through the emerging sunlight and coasted with enthusiasm as the sun took its place in the center of the sky. Above the clouds the two rode, performing rolls and dives intermittently. Hiccup had considered trying solo flight, but talked himself out of it given his condition. His head was still in the clouds, both literally and figuratively. As the moisture cooled his face amidst the strong sunlight in the high atmosphere, he tried putting recent events together.

His awakening yesterday had granted him an escape from the escapism of dreams, and in doing so left him longing for the control such a state gave him. He could see Berk on the horizon, its peak rising slowly out of the ocean. Something had been happening to his island while he was asleep, he would have to find out what. Valka apparently knew just as little due to her being away to retrieve his antidote. He needed a good long talk with Astrid to fully ascertain the situation.

He could still only remember bits and pieces in his mentally fatigued state. There was a man named O'Neill, whom he held a strong disliking for. This man had insulted his father, and brought great frustration and unnecessary headaches into his life. Then there was the black robed man. He was quiet, soft spoken. He apparently had a great deal of popularity for some reason.

Christians.

There it was, that little piece of information that had been nagging at the back of his head. Yes, the foreigners- the Irish- were Christians. Memories and opinions started to flood to the front of his mind. Mostly negative in both cases.

Irish.

Berk approached closer still. Down to business now. No more delays, no more formalities in memory of his father. Hiccup's blood circulated rapidly as it tingled with anger. Now was the time for action. Remove the scourge, remove the foreign infestation.

"Come on bud, let's grab you some lunch."

The dragon silently acknowledged the request and rolled into a dive towards the docks, Valka quickly diving to catch up with him.

"Son, where are you going?" Hiccup turned back to his mother as though it were a stupid question.

"We're gonna grab something to eat and throw out the Irish, see you at home!"

Hiccup turned his attention back to in front of him, considering the issue settled. He was surprised to find Cloudjumper making himself parallel with Toothless, his mother requesting his attention with a stern visage.

"Hiccup wait!"

"What for?" He was genuinely surprised at Valka's request. His knowledge of prior events made it seem entirely reasonable for him to act so swiftly and decisively, something which he had longed to do

for some time.

"You don't know of everything that's happened. There's been some developments with some of the Irish."

"Developments? What kind of developments?" Hiccup didn't like the sound of the word. It implied changes, both of circumstance and possibly opinion.

"I can't say much myself but just let Astrid catch you up to speed over the last couple of days. Just do that and then do whatever you want."

Hiccup was dismayed at his mother's request. He had been in such a helpless state for what felt like an eternity, he just wanted to regain some sense of control over his life, some sense of accomplishment and the satisfaction of acting as a person of his stature.

He looked ahead of him to where the statue of Stoick rose over the island. He wanted to act like a chief for once. Wanted action, much like his younger self had requested. And again he was stalled. The ways of human interaction were a frustrating one.

"Fine." He slightly growled back at his mother. "But Toothless is still getting some lunch whether you like it or not."

He wasn't sure if that was in any way a comeback or not, he only knew he wanted the conversation to end as Toothless tucked in his wings and the two descended rapidly towards the docks. They were met with a great cheer from the villagers present, elated to see their chief and Night Fury back in the conditions they were meant to be in. Hiccup unfixed himself from the saddle as Toothless nudged his master with his head, thrilled the two were back to their usual selves.

"My chief! A pleasure to see you so healed!"

"Hail the chief!"

These and other such calls were met with waves and smiles by Hiccup as he and Toothless almost paraded themselves down the docks to where a feeding station for the dragons was as full as ever. The bounty of Northern waters never seemed to abandon Berk even in its darkest hours.

It pleased Hiccup to see Berk in such good order, its traders and vendors were fixed in the chaos of the last good days of trading before the cold of winter would render visits from distant traders all but insane, and even then slightly still. Toothless made a leap and light jog to the feeding station as Hiccup looked around at what the foreigners had for sale. Mostly the same as usual. Gold, amber, pelts and other such articles of clothing.

This was his island, his people, Vikings. Good Vikings exchanging good Viking wares with other good Vikings. He would get rid of the Irish and their foreign ways. For his gods, and his father.

"Chief Hiccup?" A call for attention came from farther down the dock from a stout man in beige, leaning over a small stand set up by a large boat, one Hiccup knew from experience.

"Trader Sven!" Hiccup called back. He was delighted to see the face of the popular trader, as good a Viking as any. He walked down the dock towards him arms outstretched, welcoming the trader who always made a good profit for both himself and Berk.

"Chief Hiccup! I had heard of your misfortune! A pleasure to see you recovered."

"Yeah, still a bit fuzzy headed but overall feeling better." Hiccup lifted an arm behind his head as he took a look at the trader's wares. The usual gold brooches and intricate artwork of the Faroe Islands as Sven had told him time and time again.

"Having a good sale as usual my friend?"

"Ah yes sir, been nearly cleaned out in a day. Business is good and I like good business."

"Getting plenty of scrap metal are we?" Hiccup jested at the trader, knowing of his particular love for useless junk and broken weapons.

"Nah. I try but I've mostly been accepting coin for the time being, can't fill up too much what with the extra passengers and all."

Hiccup raised a brow at the statement.

"Other passengers?"

Trader MacAfee made sure to keep his guise of Sven as he addressed his slip of the tongue.

"Yesâ€|well when I docked I ran into your little group of Irishmen who washed ashore recently. I was relieved to find the bishop spoke Norse and so we conversed. I told him I would take the group back to Ireland as I left here."

The words were a pleasant surprise to Hiccup, who had been formulating some kind of epic cast out in the back of his mind. The fact that he could be relieved of the Celts so soon was bagpipes to his ear.

"Ohâ€|.wellâ€|.glad to here."

He smiled to the trader, grateful for his inadvertent gift. He eyed a brooch on the table for trade, a simple geometric design of three triangles interlocked. It was a spectacular golden craft, impeccably designed and glistening even in the absence of direct sunlight. MacAfee took notice of the chief's desiring eye and pressed for a sale.

"Beautiful isn't it?" He flourished a hand over the brooch before picking it up. "Picked this up for a steal in DownPatrick not too long ago."

"DownPatrick?" Hiccup inquired, unfamiliar with the foreign sounding name. MacAfee was quick to correct his slip of character.

"Ohâ€¦uhâ€¦.just a small fishing town in the Orkneys, but it's got quite a smith there."

He lifted the glistening gold to his face and admired it for himself.

"Yes, a fine craftsman indeed was its forger. Exquisite ain't it?" He kept a salesman's eye on the chief who couldn't help but agree with the trader. He felt a surge of compassion swell within him for a special woman in his life.

"You said you're accepting coin?"

"I'd rather prefer it."

"Toothless!" Hiccup called to the dragon, who reared his head from the feeding station with a salmon still half in his mouth. He was quick to swallow it and leap to his master, eager with interest as to why he was called. He was dismayed as his friend only undid a small leather pouch where what the dragon perceived to be a useless collection of silver circles were kept.

"All I got on me at the moment." Hiccup laid the seven silver pieces on the table, each containing in visage the hammer of Thor. Hiccup had worked hard with other nearby chieftains to standardize the design in the archipelago and it so far seemed to be working.

"It will do chief Hiccup." MacAfee smiled as he took the pieces with his left hand and gave Hiccup the brooch with his right.

"It's the least I can do for you taking the Irish off my hands." Hiccup leaned forward amidst the nearby presence of two women, who he recalled held a certain fascination with one of the Celts.

"Between you and me I don't trust them any more than I can throw them."

"I couldn't agree more chief Hiccup." Sven stated, ignoring whatever ethnic pride he had in the name of economy.

"It's crazyâ€¦" Hiccup leaned back as he fitted the brooch in a pocket. "...All it takes for them is to show up the whole island starts acting crazy. Celtsâ€¦"

"Yes my chief, they're an odd bunch." Sven nodded his head in solidarity with the chief as Hiccup scratched Toothless' head.

"Wellâ€¦I better be going." Hiccup looked up from the docks to a hill high in the village where he knew a special woman would be surprised at the gift of gold he would bring her. "Got chiefly things to get on with."

"Ah yes you have a good day chief Hiccup."

"Thank you trader Sven, it's good to have people like you around."

"It's good to be around."

"Come on Toothless."

Hiccup looked down to the dragon as it complied. Hiccup would forgo the couple of extra minutes spared in simply flying to the house and instead enjoy a stroll through the village, basking in the other villagers excitement at his state a little while longer. He bade farewell to Sven as he and Toothless walked off the docks.

He took out the brooch from his pocket and studied it some more. It really was impressive. The three triangles linked with each other flawlessly, each one holding a small emerald near at its point of intersection with another. Sven was right, it was indeed a master craftsman who made it. He knew Astrid would enjoy it and its design. She had a good eye for fashion. Good _Viking_ fashion.

* * *

><p>"Oh Hiccup I love it!"<p>

Astrid clutched the brooch carefully and with great admiration, running her fingers over the golden triangles and admiring the impressive work that had gone into crafting them.

"Just a little thank you gift for taking care of me while I was ill." Hiccup managed a smile towards his wife who gladly reciprocated with an embrace and kiss.

"Anything for you."

"Likewise."

Astrid broke the embrace to look over the brooch again, taking note of the emeralds near its center. They were a rarity around Berk, she knew it must have come from an exotic place.

"Picked it up from trader Sven down at the docks, got it for a fairly low price."

"Oh I don't care how much you paid for itâ€¦it's beautiful regardless." She held it up to her face, isolating Hiccup's face in one of the triangles.

"Will you put it on me?" She handed the piece to Hiccup, who gladly affixed it to the pelt Astrid wore over her shoulders. He took a step back to admire both the brooch, his wife, and their pairing together.

"Beautiful."

"And what exactly are you referring to?" Astrid said coyly.

"You know exactly what I'm referring to."

"I suppose I do." Astrid pulled Hiccup back in for a second embrace. "It's good to have you back." She whispered, holding back a slight flurry of emotion at the back of her throat.

"Well where did I go?" Hiccup's playful question carried on its contrails a more serious matter which he knew the two had to discuss.

Astrid pulled away, looked her husband in the eye and motioned to the kitchen table.

"Rightâ€¦.yeah , sit down." Hiccup went to the far side of the table as Astrid sat across from him, slightly adjusting her new brooch as she did so.

"Soâ€¦you were sick."

"Yes, I've got that much. But what was it?" Hiccup felt himself regaining his mental and physical strength by the minute, and started to have burning desire to know why he had been trapped in the chaos of his subconscious for so long.

"Wellâ€¦." Astrid looked for the right words, hoping not to have Hiccup slip into a rage at hearing her final conclusion.

"It wasâ€¦nightshade."

Hiccup leaned back in his seat and raised a brow.

"Nightshade?" It seemed ridiculous to Hiccup. He had known since he was a young explorer in the woods never to eat Nightshade, he was more than aware of its poisonous properties.

"Butâ€¦how?"

Astrid took a breath and continued. "Wellâ€¦you seeâ€¦we think you were probably poisoned at the ceremonial feast." Astrid held a grimace on her face as Hiccup absorbed the weight of the words.

"Poisoned?"

"Yes."

"By who?" Hiccup implored, fears and speculation flying rampantly in his head. Astrid knew it was the time, time to level the accusation.

"Well I personally think, and a lot of villagers think it was theâ€¦"

The back door of the house opened and let in a firm blast of arctic air, signaling that winter was finally beginning to wrap itself around Berk for the year. Closing the door behind himself was Daniel O'Rourke, a mark of pain on his face as it was pummeled by the fierce wind.

"Are the winds always so fierce around here? I almostâ€¦oh! Chief Hiccup, good to see you."

Astrid and Hiccup looked to the deacon, one with worry and the other with surprise.

"Daniel, right?" Hiccup pointed to the deacon, his full memory finally with him.

"Yes chief Hiccup." He smiled towards his host and gave a nod Astrid.

"I'm just here to grab some lunch and warm up before I head over to the main hall. The winds are too ferocious up in the fields to talk at the moment." He walked over to a cupboard to obtain a small morsel of food. Hiccup disregarded the deacon and turned back to Astrid.

"You were saying."

Astrid bit her lip slightly at the present situation. Why did Daniel have to walk in now of all times? She knew if she stalled any longer Hiccup would grow suspicious, she knew she had to confront the issue now or risk it getting bigger.

"Rightâ€|well we think it may have been theâ€|the Irish."

"What's this now?" O'Rourke turned to the group with a piece of salmon jerky in his hand, wondering why he and his company were being mentioned. Hiccup was quick to look to him with disdain and rose from the table, feeling he had all the facts he needed. He felt an immediate sense of betrayal, not stopping to wonder why Astrid would allow a man she suspected of a crime to stay under her roof.

"Hiccup stop!" Astrid tried using her voice for a moment, finding it did not work as Hiccup held O'Rourke's throat in a chokehold and pushed him back against the wall.

"Come here you bastard!" Hiccup surged with an immediate and uncontrollable rage at the deacon, the rational and understanding side he enjoyed using giving way to a desire for vengeance.

"Hiccup stop it!" Astrid pulled Hiccup away forcefully and put herself between the two. The deacon fell back against the wall in shock desperately struggling for air as Astrid held a hand firmly against Hiccup's chest.

"Astrid what are you doing?"

"Hiccup just wait a minute!" She looked to her husband with desperation, knowing she was being put into a difficult situation. Hiccup's primitive lust for vengeance began to subside as his more reasonable side retook control of his mind. He stepped back from Astrid's hand, she taking the opportunity to speak.

"Are you alright Daniel?"

"Sure..." Daniel managed weakly as he pulled himself back up.

"Astridâ€|. "

"Hiccup just hold on. It's more complicated than that. I don't think Daniel had anything to do with it."

"Umâ€|. what's going on?" Daniel inquired, somewhat eager to know why he had been put in a choke hold and his host was fighting with his wife. Hiccup looked at him with disdain as he stood on the opposite side of his wife.

"Hiccupâ€|. " Astrid began, confident the immediate rage had subsided

in her husband for the moment. "I think the other Irish had something to do with it, not Daniel."

"And what makes you so sure of that?" Hiccup was snarky in his tone, not caring for the fact that his wife had told him he had been poisoned by the compatriots of the man she was defending with her presence.

"I can't prove anything either way at the moment. All we have is speculation and circumstance, but it currently looks like one of the Irish squeezed some Nightshade into your food or drink at the ceremony."

"W-W-What?" Daniel inquired from behind Astrid, as shocked as Hiccup was at the accusation. He had had his own thoughts of maybe the chief's cousin or another potential rival being the cause of Hiccup's poor health, but he had never suspected his fellow Celts, not other good men of God.

"Yeahâ€|" Astrid turned to Daniel, knowing he needed to know her thoughts just as much as Hiccup did. "Daniel, I'm sorry but I, and as you saw yesterday a lot of others think your friends may have poisoned my husband."

Daniel looked at Astrid in shock, then to Hiccup, by now viewing the conversation with an objective face, in control of his emotions for the time being.

"Chief Hiccupâ€|." He placed his hand over his chest in an effort to show sincerity. "Iâ€|I can assure you I had nothing to do with this. I have nothing to gain from any misfortune that befalls you. You, and your wife have been a wonderful host to me in my time here, I am as shocked by these accusations as you are."

Hiccup looked to Daniel with objectivity, trying to decipher any clues about his body language that might give him proof that Daniel was lying. All he saw was a young and weak Gael, someone who probably couldn't harm a mosquito, if Berk had mosquitoes. He looked him up and down. Weak, pathetic, hardly a person capable of committing any act as egregious as poisoning. He looked back to Astrid, who he knew was hoping he would act in his traditional, rational manner.

"Okayâ€|" Hiccup moved back to the table, still keeping a wary eye on Daniel.

"Okay Hiccup?" Astrid asked as she took her own seat, Daniel moving slowly towards the front door. She had at least stopped anyone from immediately killing Daniel- that was a start.

"Soâ€|what now?" She asked as Hiccup took his seat. Hiccup took a moment to consider, his mind torn between current circumstances and angry desires.

"Wellâ€|Trader Sven said he was going to be taking the Irish off of Berk when he leaves in a day or two."

"I'm sorry... what?" Daniel asked, perplexed by the fact that he was apparently leaving this place he was beginning to call home.

"Yeah, apparently your precious bishop made a deal with him earlier today about it." Hiccup quickly answered the question and proceeded to get back to talking with Astrid.

"Now that would be fine but thisâ€¦" Hiccup trailed off a moment on contemplating the truth. He had been poisoned by his guests, people he had taken in under a banner of diplomacy. The betrayal angered him greatly, as did the presence of one of these such people under his roof.

"You were going somewhere?" He rhetorically asked the deacon with bitterness.

"Right! I was just umâ€¦-O'Rourke motioned towards the door. -â€¦um going. So I'llâ€¦uhâ€¦yeah. Bye."

O'Rourke was quick to exit the house and closed the door softly behind himself as he marched out into a gust of wind that nearly knocked him on his side. Hiccup was relieved at his absence and turned back to Astrid, who was disappointed at her husband's actions.

"Hiccupâ€¦"

"What?"

"Hiccup come on. I told you I don't think he had anything to do with it."

"And?" Hiccup asked with frustration. He was not liking the sympathetic side Astrid was showing towards Daniel. "What, I'm supposed to treat him any differently than the rest of them, the freaking Christians."

Hiccup looked towards the ground in disgust. Astrid felt a lump at the back of her throat, a lump that tasted like sweet wine. She extended an arm and took Hiccup's hand, knowing the reality of Berk had to confront its chief and vice versa.

"Hiccup, while you've been asleep there's been someâ€¦changes."

"Changes?"

"Yes well umâ€¦you see Daniel's started to gain quite the following recently. Do you remember yesterday when Eret got into that fight with Snotlout?"

"Yeahâ€¦"

"Well Eret and quite a few others are now sort ofâ€¦followers of Daniel. When he said it was too cold out to talk he was talking about talking with his followers."

"Followers?" Hiccup said, surprised at what he was hearing. He knew there were some girls who had a crush on some of the Irish but this?

"You mean as inâ€¦they want to be Christians?" He asked hesitantly, concerned for the answer. Astrid knew she had to break the truth to

him.

"I'm afraid so." The answer shook Hiccup, but only prompted him to learn more. He needed to know why good Vikings would turn to the ways of foreigners.

"Butâ€¦but why?"

"Well you see earlier that same day Snotlout and the bishop were having a little competition, to see whether either O'Neill or Gothi could pass through the flames of a Monstrous Nightmare. Neither of them could, but Daniel did. And soâ€¦"

"Wait, you mean he actually walked through the flames?" Hiccup asked, believing the story to be incredulous.

"Walked right through them, we all saw it with our own eyes. It's led to some more people taking an interest in him specifically."

Astrid was frank with Hiccup, who she hoped could still see the hope for Daniel that she did. Hiccup only sighed as he looked to Astrid and the beautiful new brooch on her chest.

"Okay, what of it then?" Hiccup asked, still trying to keep an air of confidence and control despite the facts presented to him.

"What I'm saying isâ€¦" Astrid began, hoping to keep in line with her husband. "If you act rashly now, and hurt Danielâ€¦you're going to upset a sizeable part of the village. He means a lot to some of them. And if he really had no part in your poisoning, then is there any reason to kill him, or even send himâ€¦away?"

Astrid cringed as the last phrase slipped out, knowing it would draw Hiccup's attention. And it did.

"Wait, wait Astrid are you actually saying youâ€¦you want him to stay?" Astrid held Hiccup's hand tighter both out of frustration, and a subconscious desire to be attached to her love.

"Well not so much me Hiccup but...the village. If you cause harm to him or cast him out, or even make the connection between him and your poisoning, it could hurt a lot of people."

"And what? I'm supposed to let just let the other Irish pass away, let them have their go at trying to kill me and get away? You want me to let that bastard O'Neill and his little puppet warriors slip through our fingers because you want to protect thisâ€¦this little pet Irishman of yours? Are you serious?"

Hiccup clenched the hand that Astrid held into a fist that drove her own hand away. He wanted her to get angry, he wanted to get angry with her, he wanted to be angry at something. Such urges were put on hold as Astrid responded, her head bowing to Hiccup's in her own personal shame.

"Yes." She whispered as she raised her head back up. Hiccup stalled a moment. He wasn't hearing this right. Astrid would never possibly show an interest in the Christians.

"Astrid you can'tâ€¦"

"Hiccup. I know. I know what you want to do, and I know what you're feeling. But Hiccup, theyâ€¦" She pointed out the door and implied the village. "Theyâ€¦"

Hiccup cut Astrid off as he leaned in towards her.

"Astrid, they're Christians. You can't honestly say you think we'd better off with any of them around here can you? They're soâ€¦un-Viking like. What with theirâ€¦"

Hiccup trailed off, realizing he didn't know enough about the Christians to actually name a single thing that would warrant hatred. He still maintained an air of anger though, refusing to lose sight of his goal of victory in the argument.

"Hiccupâ€¦just give him a chance is all I'm saying. The rest of them you can let slip away into the seas, but just let him stay a little while. He could change Berk for the better for all you know."

She leaned in closer to Hiccup, hoping her proximity might calm him. Hiccup looked intently into Astrid, trying to understand where this sympathy was coming from. Why on Earth would his wife care so much for such a person, a Christian no less? A whisper came from the back of his mind, from out of a twisted memory.

_"__You can't fight this forever." _

Astrid leaned just a hand's distance away from him. Her eyes were pleading with a genuine concern that baffled Hiccup. He couldn't grasp why she could possibly be acting so defensive of Daniel.

_"__Break her heart or yoursâ€¦"_

Hiccup inhaled and gave a deep sigh, knowing he was going against his baser instincts and succumbing to his wife's bizarre desires.

"Okayâ€¦just promise me one thing."

Astrid took Hiccup's hand again, relieved he was showing some of the merciful side she knew still resided somewhere within him.

"Yes?"

"Justâ€¦stay away from him Astrid. If the villagers want to listen to him talk, that's their business. Butâ€¦just stay away from him. I don't trust the Christians. I don't want to see them hurt you."

Astrid kept her face still as she absorbed the statement. Stay away from him. He was a Christian. They were Hiccup's enemies now. She supposed they could be her enemies too. For now.

"Iâ€¦"

Thud

Thud

A speck of dust fell from the ceiling as Toothless pounded on the roof.

"Oh what now?" Hiccup let out with a smile, considering Astrid's remarks finished. He felt a sense of pride at reaching a compromise of sorts, the kind he had always been known for in his adolescence. He got up and headed for the door.

"Probably wants to go on another tour of the island, not that I can blame him." Hiccup opened and closed the door behind him. Astrid leaned back in her seat, conflicted.

"Hurt me?" She whispered to herself. She knew none of the Irish could hurt her, at least not physically. She looked towards the door where Hiccup had left, and could hear him through the walls talking to Toothless as the echoes of his paws descending the house reverberated through the kitchen.

Hurt her? No. Hurt him? She wondered. She could still feel at the far back of her throat the wine from that morning, its sudden appearance in her yak skin still puzzled her. She knew Hiccup wanted vengeance, and she did as well. But despite how much she had been raised to seek it, she found herself pleading with her husband to forgo it in the name of protecting a foreigner. She didn't want to see Daniel injured, didn't want to see Hiccup betrayed, didn't want to see the villagers mourn the loss of a new spiritual leader. She knew something would have to give at some point, but at what point exactly remained to be seen.

She looked down at her breast to the brooch she had just received. The three triangles locked together still, emeralds gleaming in their majesty. It was beautiful, these three threes.

* * *

><p>A fierce wind from the small amount of land even more far North than Berk draped the island in an arctic chill that Daniel was very pleased to escape among the thick walls and warming fires of the great hall. His followers had already gone ahead of him and made themselves comfortable at two tables near the far end of the hall. Eret, Son of Eret had taken the deacon's book and looked over its foreign words with the rest of the group. Daniel found a mild enjoyment in the sight, knowing that he was the key they so desired to unlock the wonders he had come to know from the book. At least he thought so.<p>

He was somewhat surprised to find O'Gara amidst the ranks of his throng, conversing and making nice with them in his own typically diplomatic manner. Daniel supposed the knight perhaps wanted to better understand the dragon riding people much like he had. His mild amusement at the sight quickly fell apart into concern however. Despite escaping Hiccup's house mostly unharmed, his knowledge of the accusations that could be flying in Luke's direction and the repercussions he would face filled Daniel with dread and concern for his friend. He put on his most diplomatic and calm face as he walked over to his followers, who greeted him with raised goblets and the usual welcomes.

"Ah, glad to see you didn't get blown away out there deacon."

"Yes, yes thank you." Daniel looked to his fellow Celt who was just as happy to see the deacon. "Luke, may I speak with you a moment?" O'Rourke managed with grace, drawing minimal suspicion or interest from the crowd, except O'Gara himself. The knight rose and excused himself from the table, curious as to why he was being singled out. O'Rourke led him off to a corner, the followers turning back amongst themselves without concern.

"Daniel, what's going on?"

"We should talk in our native tongue for now brother."

"Okay, why?" Luke responded, bringing the full conversation into Gaelic.

Daniel leaned close to O'Gara, not even trusting the safety of his own language to speak with much volume.

"Luke, I was just at the chief's houseâ€|" Daniel trailed off, looking for the right way to phrase the words. O'Gara gestured for him to continue.

"Andâ€|wellâ€|"

"Yes?" O'Gara beckoned the deacon to speak, irritated with his delays.

"Luke, did you poison the chief?"

O'Gara's eyes widened at the implication. His worst fears were coming true.

"W-what?"

"Did youâ€|poisonâ€|the chief?" Daniel was direct in his tone, wanting only the truth and nothing but. O'Gara found himself overcome with a desire to keep things in the open, even if fearful of his fate.

"Danielâ€|not me personally butâ€|"

"Yes?"

O'Gara sighed, knowing the answer would trouble the deacon greatly.

"Not me, it wasâ€|the bishop. Heâ€|slipped some Nightshade juice into the chief's drink when he left to deal with the fight I got into with the chief's cousin."

O'Rourke took a step back in shock.

It was true.

"What? B-but w-why?" O'Rourke implored, incapable of seeing a reason behind such a heinous action. He knew the bishop wasn't very trustful of the dragons or the chief, but this? O'Gara tried to find an

explanation, knowing that he was almost as devoid of one as the deacon.

"Heâ€|he thinks that by doing so he has given usâ€|you- more time to spread the Word. At least that's what he wanted. Now it'sâ€|."

"Now it's what?"

"Now itâ€|he doesn't quite trust you anymore to carry out the Word. I would especially doubt so after your littleâ€|display... with Eret's beast yesterday. He thought that maybe youâ€|could try and convince these people to abandon the dragons. Now of course it seems as thoughâ€|God has had other plans.

Luke gestured over to the table where Eret, Son of Eret and the other followers continued to converse amongst themselves, unconcerned with the two Irishmen.

"Butâ€|but surely the bishop can see by now the dragons don't mean him or any of us harm? We could certainly talk some sense into him, perhaps even have him give the chief some resitutâ€|"

Luke raised his hand and brought the deacon's wild and concerned ideas to a halt as the knight spoke.

"Daniel, what you have done here is very impressive for such a short amount of time. But if the chief suspects us of his poisoning- as he should- we can't afford to be reasonable right now."

Luke looked at the table again, fresh minds open to God that would have to be abandoned in the name of mortal preservation.

"The bishop had made a deal with a trader from our homeland who disguises himself as a Norseman to take us with him back home with him. We leave in a day or two. It's for the betterâ€|for all of us to leave this place Daniel."

He took his friend's arm, genuinely concerned for his safety if left to his own in this strange land.

"Come back with us Daniel. Please.

The deacon looked to O'Gara with shock and fear. He turned back and caught a glimpse of his followers, these people he had begun to call friends, who cared for him as he did them, whom his own people wanted to see abandoned.

"No. "

The suddenness and implications of the word caught Luke by surprise.

"What?" O'Gara inquired, needing more of an explanation.

"No. Luke, if you want to leave with the rest of them, please do not let me stop you. Butâ€|I can't go back."

"What do mean you can't go back?"

"I can't go back to the way things were before. The fighting, the

raids, the war, the hatredâ€|"

Daniel took a moment to phrase his words carefully.

"What these people have here, this is something special. And to themâ€|I'mâ€|I'm something special. I can't give up on them, I can't just abandon them now."

"Danielâ€|- O'Gara held the deacon's arm firmly- I respect what you're trying to do, but this is suicide. If you don't leave with us the rest of the village is still going to want vengeance for the poisoning, and that's only going to leave one of us to take vengeance onâ€|you. Don't be an idiot Daniel. The Word will reach them in time."

"Luke, I commend you for caring for me in such a way, but I must stay. They need me, I need them. If I should for some reason perish as a result of the bishop's sins, I will do so doing what I was brought up to do, spreading the Word."

Daniel's resoluteness left Luke with a loss for words. This man, barely no longer a boy taking so firm a stance, placing his life in his hands and those of vengeful Vikings. It was commendable to O'Gara's more militaristic side, and humbling to his spiritual one.

"Deacon, are you almost done?"

Daniel looked over to the group spread out over the tables, growing anxious at the delay.

"Well, duty calls. Care to join me?"

O'Gara followed the deacon back to the table, joining his audience in attendance and the Daniel in vocation.

* * *

><p>Hiccup decided he would withstand the pounding winds for as long as it took for him to calm himself. After another series of maneuvers and aerial tours with Toothless, the two had finally expelled all their pent up energy for the time being, and rested near a remote part of the village overlooking the statue of Stoick beneath them. It comforted Hiccup to be out of its shadow, even if he did not care to look down at it at the moment. Toothless rested his head on his master's lap, eyes closed and enjoying the easy stroke of his master's palm on his back.<p>

The morning which had started off with the promise of everything returning to normal had developed into something quite the opposite. His mind constantly wandered between twisted fantasies of vengeance and uncertainty in his wife.

No. Not Astrid.

The fact that she had defended Daniel that morning upset him greatly. It was one thing to have other villagers take an interest if not a liking to one of the Irish, and at least it was the most tolerable of them. To have his own wife, the love of his life, show any kind of sympathy towards him was a different matter though. It was just...not

Astrid. This wasn't like her. He was supposed to be the one who stood up for the weak, the different, the misunderstood. Then again when he didn't want to fill that role he supposed someone else would have to step in.

Of course in this case it just happened to be the one woman who shouldn't have stepped into that role.

"What am I going to do Toothless?"

He asked the dragon rhetorically. He was somewhat relieved that the beast could not reply with anything more than a moan as Hiccup dug in between his shoulder blades. At least here he wouldn't have to deal with a sarcastic and ethereal voice tormenting him with unpleasant memories. Now he only had his own sarcastic and nasally voice tormenting himself with the present.

Keeping Daniel around. The decision tormented him and filled him with regret. Even if the other Irish did leave, if they never came back and left Berk alone for the rest of his life, Hiccup would still have to deal with a scrawny young Celt completely undoing the one thing that despite every hardship had kept Berk together.

The gods.

What had the gods done to deserve this? What had he done to deserve this? He kept remembering what Astrid had told him about Daniel passing through the blaze, of how both O'Neill and Gothi had been rejected. He wasn't surprised by O'Neill, but much more by the fire's rejection of Gothi. The gods had rejected their own woman, in favor of a man who came to replace them. It made no sense for the gods to be defeated and so publically.

A rapid beating of wings came from overhead. Hiccup looked up to see a Stormcutter descending towards him. It's rider was the other special woman in his life, who he felt a slight deal of regret for not getting something special as well. He would have to run down to trader Sven and get another brooch tomorrow. Valka leaped off the beast and was escorted down by one of its wings. Toothless got up from his rest and went to address Cloudjumper, who bowed in respect to the Alpha.

"There you are."

"Hey mom." He managed without much enthusiasm, his lap growing cold in Toothless' absence. Valka walked forward, the air of a mother determined to comfort surrounding her.

"Astrid told me what happened this morning."

"Did she?" He retorted, not caring for such an event being to topic of conversation. Valka took a seat besides her son, wrapping her arm around him in a gesture to ease.

"Hiccupâ€¦" she began. "I'm just as upset about this whole matter as you are."

"Really, were you poisoned as well?"

Hiccup knew better than to take such a bitter tone with his mother,

but felt his usual filter was not with him in such a time of spiritual distress. Valka could see this and brushed off the comment as she continued.

"No. But Hiccup, Astrid is right. You can't just punish all the Irish for the workings of one or a few. Even if you let the rest slip away, keeping Daniel is not going to harm anyone. You've got to relax about this."

Valka could feel the tension and frustration rolling off Hiccup like a torrent. She could sense his consternation at being dragged out of coma and thrown back into this chaotic situation. Hiccup sighed as he responded to his mother's plea for rationality.

"It's not that mom. That's not what bothers me." In truth he was still rather irritated at having an attempt on his life being made, but in the grand scheme of things it was something he could overlook.

"It's everything elseâ€¦" He gestured below him to the statue of his father, as silent a guardian over the village as ever.

"Why'd they have to come here mom? Why couldn't I have just sent them out on an old fishing boat the morning after we found them, let them fend for themselves?"

He let his head slunk down, his mothers arm falling down his back.

"It's a mess."

Valka brought herself in closer, sensing the true dread that lay within her son's heart pushing its way to the surface.

"Why her?" He looked to his mother, who knew the question hinted at the darkest thoughts of Hiccup's mind.

"It's not fair." He sighed, knowing he was admitting his feelings for the first time to anyone outside himself.

"Just when everything started going right, just when everything started becoming normal again. Just when I wasâ€¦" He looked down to his father's statue, it's backed turned towards him.

"Just when I was becoming the one thing I always wanted to becomeâ€¦A Viking. And thenâ€¦then â€¦"

He paused, both for dramatic effect and at a loss for words.

"And then once that happens, it's as if nobody wants to be a Viking anymore. Just when I win the race, another one begins, and I'm already down a leg." He gestured with slight amusement at his prosthesis, trying to undercut the tension of the moment with humor.

Valka looked at her son, feeling both dejected and rejected, being pummeled by a fierce Northerly wind. She pulled him towards herself, her motherly desire to comfort pulsing through her.

"Hiccupâ€¦" Her commentary was broken for a moment as a tree branch

fell nearby, a result of Toothless and Cloudjumper engaging in a lighthearted game of tag.

"Hiccup, you can't just mope around at a time like this. Life is changing, and unless you're dead you've got to take a part in that change. If the island wants to changeâ€¦if Astrid wants to change who they are, you've got to do something about it."

Hiccup knew his mother meant well by the statement, but could not yet bring himself to thank her when he still had his own complaints to voice.

"Butâ€¦butâ€¦I don't _want_ them to change. I don't want _her_ to change. I just got everything the way I had always wanted it to be. I have power, I have the love of my life, I have friends, I haveâ€¦"

He stopped, looking down to his father's statue. He didn't have everything he wanted. Valka saw her opportunity and took it.

"Son, nobody has ever had or ever will have everything they could ever want. The whole goal of life is roll with what comes along, and while we may not have everything we wantâ€¦"

She held a hand over her son's heart, beckoning his face to look into hers.

"We can rest knowing we have everything we need."

The wisdom, as if taken from the pages of bygone texts was enough to ease Hiccup's anxiety for the moment. His face fell flat, not out of sadness, but of ambivalence. The wind continued to blow hard against the two. Hiccup used its cold sting to justify the tear that formed at the corner of his eye. He brushed it away without concern for Valka seeing it or not, and looked further below him to the village below. A village that wanted something different than him, as always. A village that he had to lead and yet found being led away from him, and the gods. If only because he didn't want to risk upsetting his mother any more than he sensed her to be, he swallowed his anger and absorbed his tears.

"Thanks mom."

* * *

><p>Despite the day having gone by and having finished her usual chores and hobbies, Astrid found herself back where she had been sitting that morning with Hiccup, only this time alone. After a mostly quiet dinner and with Hiccup still fatigued given his recent ill health, both he and Valka had retired early that evening.<p>

The fierce winds of earlier that day had been the precursor to a storm of truly impressive magnitude, even for Berk. It was still too warm for snow, but too cold for the rain to be enjoyable. It pattered the walls without relent, as if a single river of water flowed without end over the island. Thunder and lightning occasionally broke the monotony with their brief presence, but then faded while the rain continued.

I want you stay away from him.

Hiccup's request to Astrid had bothered her throughout the day for several reasons. For starters, how was she supposed to stay away when he still lived under her roof? She supposed that given he always rose early and stayed out late this wouldn't be too much of an issue, at least not for the moment.

But it was the implication behind the request that troubled Astrid more. She knew Hiccup didn't trust the Irish, let alone their religion. But O'Rourke she knew they could trust if nobody else.

I don't want to see them hurt you.

It warmed her heart that Hiccup cared for her in such a way, but it troubled her that such thoughts would be on his mind. Daniel wouldn't hurt her. Not only was it simply unlikely from a physical standpoint, but Astrid couldn't see either the capacity or desire within the Irishman to do so. He could never hurt her.

And yet somehow he had caused her more ache than any cramp, scar or illness she had ever had.

Why couldn't Hiccup have just thrown them out to fend for themselves on a small fishing boat the morning after they arrived? Why did diplomacy have to bring about such an uncomfortable situation?

She looked over to the wall where she kept her riding gear. Below it and still in its holster was the yak skin from that morning. She got up and took it, undoing the lid and smelled it.

Still wine, as sweet smelling as that morning.

She didn't care how it had gotten in the hide, or whether or not it held any special significance to Daniel, she needed to drink it. She took a large gulp and brought it back with her to the table.

She wanted to be angry with herself for what had transpired that morning. She wanted to feel the same rage she had after she had prayed over Hiccup's body several days ago. Yet despite how much she tried clenching her empty fist, the anger simply wasn't there. She had accepted the other god, accepted its body and blood.

I want you to stay away from him.

To stay away from what? His kindness? His openness? His willingness to give the village something new, perhaps something better? How could she, and more so why should she stay away? To protect Hiccup? Protect him from what? She took another sip of the wine, still as satisfying as it was this morning.

The lock was picked and against a strong wind Daniel O'Rourke pulled open the front door and slammed it behind him, falling back against it in exhaustion and closing his eyes, water pouring down his face like a stream.

"Oh Lord why must you punish this island with such wicked storms?"

He opened his eyes to a welcoming sight.

"Oh... hello Astrid."

"Hello Daniel." Astrid replied, torn between her standard niceties and being cruel for the sake of pleasing Hiccup.

"And to answer your question it's because it just wouldn't be as much fun without the storms" She joked lightly. Daniel grabbed his hair and bunched it into a single cord before wringing it out, wiping off the excess water and oil from his hair on his robe. He moved and grabbed a small goblet and filled it with an equally small portion of mead before placing it outside a moment, letting the rain water the mead down for himself as he settled back indoors.

"Where's your bible?" Astrid asked plainly, noticing it was for once not on the deacon's person. The question caught Daniel by surprise as his eyes opened with the realization.

"Ohâ€¦.must have left it at the hall." He kicked the table lightly in frustration, very much wanting not to have to brave the storm again to retrieve it.

"Eh, Eret, Son of Eret will probably hold onto it for me until morning. Good think I didn't bring it with me I suppose, probably would have gotten more soaked than me out there." Daniel made the best of the situation as he took a seat opposite Astrid at the table, slightly to her left so as not to be completely across from her and imply equality between the two.

"Long day out there?" Astrid asked, figuring some light conversation between her and the deacon couldn't possibly hurt her. Then againâ€¦|

"Yes. After this morning they all started asking me more about the Eucharist and then all the other sacraments and their meanings and their implications and whatnot. I don't mind but it is exhausting work."

Something about Daniel's words caught Astrid as distinctly foreign, and she pressed for information, not caring if it hurt her or not.

"Sacraments?"

"Oh, right. Well you see there's seven things we call sacraments. They're like... I guess seven stages of faith almost. They are of great importance to the church as evidence of people's commitment to the faithâ€¦|"

Astrid felt her heart sink a little at the statement. She had made a demonstration of faith alright, and the villagers had seen it. Oh gods or God, what a mess.

"And so eventually it got to the point where Eret, Son of Eret asked me whether I could baptize him or not and-"

"Wait, what?" Astrid asked, both out of an unfamiliarity with the word and an uneasiness about what it implied. Daniel picked up on the sensitivity of the moment and tried to phrase himself carefully.

"Well it'sâ€¦uhâ€¦the sacrament by which one is brought into the faith, through which they may find Salvation in...accepting theâ€¦" Daniel trailed off as he took particular notice of a golden brooch above Astrid's left breast, not that he staring in that area for any other purpose of course.

"Umâ€¦Astrid? Where did you get that brooch?"

Astrid looked down to the piece, wondering why Daniel took any particular notice of it. She placed a finger on it.

"Oh this? Hiccup gave it to me this morning beforeâ€¦wellâ€¦this morning." She knew Hiccup's assault on Daniel had left him frazzled, and hoped she could work out some sort of accord between the two if Hiccup was sincere in letting Daniel stay.

"Do you know where he got it?"

"Said he picked it up from a trader."

"Was it... an Irish trader?"

The question troubled Astrid in its implication.

"Uh, I don't think so. We've really never had your people around here before untilâ€¦well you know." Daniel nodded his head at the subtle reference that was the tragedy of his shipwreck. "Why would you ask?"

"Ohâ€¦well...uh...the design." He pointed to the brooch. "It's the trinity, like how I showed you last week." It's a popular design back in Ireland."

Astrid's eyes opened slightly at the statement. She looked down at the brooch again. Three triangles. It did make senseâ€¦

"This, is an Irish brooch?" Astrid asked, uneasy in the implications of her wearing such an object.

"Umâ€¦.yes. Isâ€¦that a problem?" Daniel asked hesitantly, fearing he had upset his host. Astrid looked to the deacon, more concerned for her than she was for him. It was in a way a problem, and she knew breaking such a fact to Hiccup would be difficult. Then again, as long as he didn't know, it could be her little secretâ€¦

"Wellâ€¦umâ€¦no. Not for me butâ€¦" Astrid sighed, feeling a swelling of honesty from deep within herself surge upwards. She reached forward as if to grab Daniel's hand, but retracted it carefully, knowing well enough not to take things too far at that point.

"Daniel, I hope you know that there are a lot of people on this island that don't like or trust you. Some of them would have been more than happy to have seen you burn up in that blaze the other day. There areâ€¦"

Astrid stopped as Daniel extended his own hand halfway across the table, letting it be still as he interjected himself into the conversation as politely as he could.

"There are also people on this island who care about me. I know this much. As long as I am loved by them, and by God, I will be fine. Nobody who is cared for is ever in true peril, for they always have a friend."

Astrid was struck by how Daniel seemed to brush off the threat of death without care, as if he either knew it was coming, or he simply refused to confront the reality. She hated herself for it, but she knew she would be deeply troubled to see such a fate befall him.

"Danielâ€¦justâ€¦don't do anything that's going to make them hurt you."

Astrid found herself moving her own hand back out onto the table, gently overlapping it with Daniel's, the man who brought her both pain and pleasure. The deacon looked down as the slim, feminine digits wrapped around his own, in much the way he had done to her that stressful first morning of Hiccup's illness.

"I don't want to see them hurt you. Iâ€¦"

She stopped herself, trying amidst a flustered face to analyze the consequences of the words she would say. It wasn't blasphemy, wasn't a crime, nor a sin, yet it felt worse than any but together. She tried to find a way to make it sound innocent, knowing that the words carried a deeper implication that she herself was unsure of.

"Iâ€¦you areâ€¦I...you are loved here Daniel."

The blasts of rain outside were the only sound in the room. The two looked towards each other, unsure what to make of the utterance. Daniel broke the quiet by retracting his hand and looking towards the door nervously.

"Well you know the rain is dying around a little. I shouldâ€¦uhâ€¦probably go and see if I can get my bible back from Eret, Son of Eret. So I'll justâ€¦uhâ€¦goâ€¦doâ€¦that." He gestured weakly towards the door and got up, passing quickly to the exit and opening and closing it behind him.

He stood beneath the overhang of the roof, looking out into the storm that was hardly any weaker than before. His robe would be thoroughly soaked again, but he felt he needed another good bathing, as if God desired he be baptized again. He felt for the silver cross beneath his robe, still with him despite his internal troubles. He pressed it hard against his sternum, trying to remind himself of who he was, whoever that person may have been. He sighed, looked across the village to the great hall, and decided he would spend the night there. Better to be near Viking blades than Viking hands he supposed.

Astrid was left to herself in the house again, alone in more ways than one. What was she doing?

I want you to stay away from him.

The more aggressive, warrior-esque part of her mind was in compliance

with the request, and wondered agonizingly why the more emotional and sympathetic side of the mind did not agree.

How could she stay away from someone who offered her so much, and yet so little? Who seemed to bring her island and herself an entire new world and yet was only identified by the island he hailed from?

Astrid looked back down at the brooch again. The trinity was with her now, much to both her and Hiccup's collective mistake. This brooch, this trinity she felt could be a new and great part of her life. One she didn't want to stay apart from. One she wanted to embrace regardless of the consequences.

12. Oil and Water

In keeping with the spirit of nature last evening's maelstrom gave way to a most pleasant morning, one which Daniel tried to appreciate as he sat on the steps of the Great hall. A breeze, cool enough to be pleasant but not overbearing enough to knock the heat out of him gently swept through the island, as if the final fading melody of the symphony of discord the last night had brought. Such discord was both external, as much of the island had suffered some damage amidst the ferocious winds, as well as internal as Daniel knew all too well.

His night in the hall had gone by totally undisturbed, Daniel's Irish genes proving even crazier than those of the Vikings when it came to battling storms. In the solitude and quiet of the hall- or what passed for quiet when such a hollow area was pummeled by rain- Daniel had done his best to console himself amidst the chaotic previous day. Learning of his bishop's deeds, nearly being killed for it, and being saved by beautiful Astrid. Just another day on Berk.

Beautiful Astrid...

Despite his best efforts to lose himself in the trance of prayer that usually comforted him, Daniel found such incantations were no match against baser and less spiritual desires. His sleep was overcome with fantasy, ones that his waking self would at least try and scold him for. The night grew long with the twisting and turning of sleep and waking anxiety, his isolation proving no barrier against mental desires which by the early morning Daniel's weary soul allowed to become physical. Idle hands were indeed the devil's playthings, and Daniel now well understood the meaning of such a phrase.

"Oh Lord why do you torture me with such pleasure?"

He asked himself, his head falling against the fist he made with his left hand to prop up the otherwise dejected cranium. To be enticed, so fraught with never before experienced temptation frustrated Daniel infinitely. This was not who he was, not what he was supposed to be. Then again, he was also supposed to be in Scotland right now hunting for dragon's to kill. God, or perhaps the devil was toying with him, for what reasons he could not fathom. To have such feelings, such strong physical desires ached him in their ferocity.

"You are loved here Daniel."

Was it all just physical? Perhaps Luke was right in his advice those few nights back. While Daniel knew his body was driven by primitive and unholy longings, it could certainly not be all that attracted him to this Nordic angel. Could it? She had protected him, looked after him, and treated him with a respect he had not known much in his travels across Ireland. She had given him the opportunity to spread God's message and love to these people, for this he was ever grateful to her. Perhaps God had bestowed upon him a greater and nobler feeling than those he had wrestled with so vigorously the night before.

But why her then? Why would Daniel be granted such a pleasure as to love but have such love fall on a heathen woman, a married one, and married to a chief at that?

A chief who rode a Night Fury was not one to be messed with, regardless of faith or marital status.

_"__You are loved here Daniel."_

Constantly thinking about the phrase from the previous night left Daniel feeling he had analyzed the five words to death. Still, their implications were just outside his true reach of understanding. It couldn't be reciprocal, could it? No. He had seen the way she had cared for the chief, the way she had longed for his recovery and embraced him so passionately upon his awakening. The way she looked after and prayed for him.

Prayed for him. With he, the resident Christian of the Haddock household. Daniel still felt amidst his internal strife the calming warmth of his devotion, and the sensation of mutual peace he had felt with Astrid that first hectic morning. Was the quickest way to a woman's heart but an appeal to the spirit? It was certainly nothing John or Matthew had discussed with him, not that he had enjoyed such awkward recounts of their conquests much anyways.

To be loved the way he loved he knew to be a sensation well beyond his reach and her capacity. Such feelings, if they existed at all he knew would never manifest themselves in such a steadfast wife, and for that he was mildly relieved, knowing that the act of union meant something special to both his own culture and the one he had been forced into.

Not that he had to continue being forced into it. He could leave with Luke and the bishop and the others and never come to this island again, leaving behind the temptation and the hatred and the chaos and the accusations.

And the love.

Not necessarily the love of the one he longed for, but of this new and quite pleasing respect and admiration he now received. Back home, he was but another young lad placed into the profession of faith by parents who couldn't provide for him. Just a cloak in the background of the cities no different than any of the others. Here, he was a prophet, a man of interest, one who commanded respect and held a group of Vikings in the palms of his hands. Hands that could sin and still speak the Word. Playthings of both the devil and God it seemed. Hands that had joined with Astrid's, as if begging him onwards with the simple touch.

He looked out from the steps of the hall to the village center not too far away. A purple Monstrous Nightmare stretched its wings at the top of the roof of its owner and made a call into the morning before ascending upwards to fully embrace the day with flight. Though he had tried pushing it to the back of his mind, he couldn't help but smile with some pride at recalling his recent fiery endeavor. He had tried not to question the momentous event, tried merely to accept that it had happened and move on, but it was satisfying to know that despite his own sins God was still with him. Perhaps he was beating himself up over nothing then? Perhaps he was not as flawed a person as he thought himself to be.

He wished he could believe himself. Wished he could believe that his unholy indulgence that night was not his own fault, a deficiency in his resolve and faith which troubled his humble core. He was resolved to guilt, finding it helped keep himself from reveling in the hubris his recently acquired stature and position had granted him.

_"__You are loved here Daniel."_

He was, he knew this to be true of many of the Vikings. He also knew he was hated to a certain extent as well, hated by those Astrid wanted to protect him from.

Protect him. She wanted to help him.

Was this really such a big deal? Certainly it was only diplomacy and the niceties one would expect from a well-developed person. Of course. Nothing important.

Every attempt Daniel made to give perfectly rational explanations to Astrid's kindness and protectiveness fell apart amidst a torrent of romantic fantasy and the possibility of mutual attraction. He knew such thoughts were both unsuitable for someone like himself and would remain only that, thoughts. Very pleasant thoughts, but thoughts nonetheless. His mind deemed it best for them to remain such, even if his body disagreed.

"Deacon?"

Daniel was broken from his well-worn train of thought by Eret, Son of Eret's call. He looked to his right to find the man approaching him, Daniel's bible in hand. He had found upon returning to the hall that Eret, Son of Eret had indeed taken the book with him for safekeeping. For this Daniel was grateful, he knew he could never forgive himself had he lost himself to physical pleasure in sight of the text, the weight of his cross around his neck was an unfortunate reminder enough.

"Good morning Eret, Son of Eret."

"Good morning." He handed the text to Daniel, who sat up straight and tried to put on an air of assurance around his pupil, not wanting himself to be seen in such a torn state.

"Are we ready?" Eret, Son of Eret asked, anticipating an event Daniel took a moment to remember.

"Oh right, the baptism."

Though he was not technically of the proper station to administer such a rite, Luke's confession to him left him fully unwilling to seek O'Neill's assistance in the matter. He still didn't quite understand why O'Neill had done what he had done, but he knew he could save that confrontation until later in the day.

"Oh umâ€¦yes I suppose so. Is everything ready?"

"Got everything prepared down by the shore, all we need is you."

Daniel smiled at the remark, appreciating that he was actually needed for something. He held the bible close to his chest and rose, stretching his back as the breeze waved his hair gently. Someone at least needed him, even if he needed someone else.

"Let's be on with it then."

_"__You are loved here Daniel."_

* * *

><p>"Idiot."<p>

Astrid pounded her head against the door of her house as she stepped outside. She woke up alone, back into the usual routine she had come to know. The usual feelings of longing for her husband and morning fatigue were soon destroyed by memories of her conversation last night. What had she said? She herself wasn't sure.

_"__You are loved here Daniel."_

Loved where? By whom? She knew he had his little following, and she knew how much they loved and respected him.

She was not one of them.

She couldn't be. She wanted nothing to do with this Irishman who had the audacity to challenge her gods, gods she had never cared about. Who dared to replace them with one new God, a God she was fascinated with, who had protected this Celt in the fires of a Monstrous Nightmare.

_"__You are loved here Daniel."_

She felt her grip on her axe lighten as she let it fall into a better grip. She needed to let this aggression, or doubt, or whatever cocktail of emotions she felt be released in combat training. Her own poorly phrased words were going to result in several dead trees. A pity.

She began to walk a few steps over to the stables and Stormfly before noticing Snotlout farther down in the village.

Snotloutâ€¦|.

This was all his fault. If he hadn't started that stupid competition in the first place Daniel's little stunt would have never happened, the village would not be increasingly interested in the Gael and she

would not be doubting her barely existent faith. She would not have had to say something as stupid as she had said last night.

_"__You are loved here Daniel."_

No he wasn't. Not by half the village and certainly not by her. Her heart remained loyal to Hiccup, who was of course nowhere to be found. It would never be stolen by some insolent Celt, a poor insolent Celt betrayed by his leader and stranded in a foreign land. A pity.

Speaking of which, Snotlout. She trudged her way down the hill, trying to keep her balance on the still soft and muddy ground. He seemed to be heading down through the village and towards the shoreline following far behind someone else; Astrid would not let him out her sight.

"You!" It was a pleasing sensation to approach one the most despised people in her life with an angry voice and brandishing an axe, though she reminded herself to at least keep most of his limbs intact.

"What the hell do you think you've been doing you son a half troll-"

"Not now Astrid, something big is going on."

Did he seriously just brush her off? The insult only enraged her more as she pursued him, swinging her axe in front of his face to stop him before resting the blade on his chest and pushing him backwards as she got in front of him.

"What? Whatâ€¦is...goingâ€¦on?"

Snotlout kept a calm expression about himself as with his right hand he slowly moved Astrid's axe away from his clavicle and tried to ease the enraged shield maiden.

"Easy there Astrid."

"No I will not beâ€¦"

"Irish are up to something down at the beach, we're going to go have a look."

"You seriously think I'm gonna let you deal with the Irish again you arrogantâ€¦"

Snotlout brushed her off yet again as he slipped by her blade and made a dash down the hill, eager both to explore the new display to be made by the foreign contagion and to escape Astrid's well known wrath. Astrid herself pursued, axe swinging by her side as she struggled to close the distance. Her frustration with herself and Daniel was not the only reason she wanted to go into the woods to train. The other wives were right; marriage does do a number on one's fitness.

"Get back here!"

Snotlout was certainly more agile than she last recalled, but she

maintained a close distance behind him as he both fled from and led her down to a patch of beach a short ways away from town, where Astrid saw quite a sizeable contingent of the village was gathered on the cold sand which only proved to slow both the runners down.

Astrid let Snotlout slip from her grasp as she took in the sight, letting her unfortunate cousin join a small group she recognized to be his closest followers as she took a position on a sand dune, letting her axe drop down to her side. She scanned the scene before her. She noticed a band of thirty villagers were gathered around someone, someone with long black hair.

Daniel.

Why? She couldn't see any of the other Irish around at the moment, so he was obviously the only Celt of attention in the area. He usually was up in the mountain, what would he be doing down here?

_Oh right, the baptism... _

Daniel's brief description of it to her last night left Astrid with plenty of questions about the ceremony. She had learned only that it meant an induction into the faith, which she was certain was not going to be the most well received of actions. She wished she had kept Daniel on topic last night instead of letting the conversation get caught up in the meaning of her brooch, which she held a hand to as she recalled the implications of wearing it. As controversial as it was beautiful...never a better combination.

She saw through the crowd Eret, Son of Eret was following Daniel as the two processed out into the sea, she could feel their frustration at the coldness of the water from her position. She felt like she should do something, say something. But about what? She knew if she put a stop to this it would break Daniel's trust in her. Not that she cared much one way or the other what he thought of her, she told herself.

Daniel led Eret, Son of Eret further out until both were up to their waists at twenty yards from shore, the low tide warranting such a distance being traversed. Daniel held in one of his hands a small jar; she was unsure what was in it. They had stopped, both the supporters and the detractors watching in silence as a light breeze fell over the ocean. Daniel and Eret, Son of Eret faced each other, both well aware of the tension that surrounded them.

"Please be alright." Astrid found herself saying, and convincing herself she was talking about Eret, Son of Eret.

Daniel placed his left hand on Eret, Son of Eret's head, took a breath and proclaimed.

"Eret, Son of Eret: Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth?"

"I do."

Astrid winced at the public confession, noticing a swelling of anger and conspicuous glances amongst Snotlout and company.

"Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son our Lord, who was born and has suffered for us?"

"I do."

"Do you believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic church, the Communion of Saints, the Forgiveness of sins, the Resurrection of the flesh, and life everlasting?"

"I do."

Astrid noticed a continuous mumbling going on in Snotlout's group. She tightened her grip on her axe again, feeling she might have to jump in and protect Eret, Son of Eret. And Daniel. She would protect Daniel too, as much as it pained her to admit.

Daniel lifted the small cup in his right hand over Eret, Son of Eret's head, pouring out what Astrid realized to be oil lightly on the Viking's head.

"With this oil and this signâ€¦" Daniel performed the sign of the cross in front of Eret, Son of Eret. "I, Daniel O'Rourke baptize you, Eret, Son of Eret in the name of the Fatherâ€¦"

"Daniel! Stop this!"

Astrid was startled by the proclamation from behind her as bishop O'Neill and his four knights quickly rushed down the beach, keeping out of close distance from both gathered groups of Vikings as they waded out into the water. Astrid stopped herself from pursuing, despite how much her axe desired to spill the blood of her husband's conspirators. She knew making such a public scene could only lead to chaos. The group began to quickly wade into the water and approached Daniel and Eret, Son of Eret. Though she had some concern over the two's safety, the Irish were not armed, they could pose no threat to either. She instead opted to watch, interested as to why the Irish were trying to put a stop to the action.

"Bishop, what are you doing here?" Daniel inquired, managing a nervous look to O'Gara, who reciprocated a view of sympathy as he waded into a position between Daniel and the shore. O'Neill stopped a yard away from the deacon, noticing the oil dripping down Eret, Son of Eret's face.

"Daniel, what are you doing?" O'Neill asked tersely, not caring much of the importance of the moment. Both crowds of Vikings on the shore viewed the sight with curiosity. Daniel's followers perplexed why Daniel's so called compatriots were putting a stop to the ceremony. Snotlout's camp only saw more Irishmen, a bigger target for their collective rage.

"Iâ€¦.Iâ€¦I'mâ€¦baptizing thisâ€¦"

"I know what you're doing!" The bishop exclaimed, making Daniel wonder why O'Neill had asked such a question in the first place.

"You dare accept one of these dragon riders into the faith?" The bishop pronounced. Luke eyed back and forth between the shore and its two hoards of Vikings and the small confrontation behind him. When he

heard the other Irish were going to investigate something going on at the shore, he had assumed it code they were leaving, not this debacle.

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked, confused as to why the bishop was putting a stop to a ceremony he should have always condoned.

"Of course I am baptizing him, what is the problem with that?" Daniel held a dagger in his tone, his knowledge of what the bishop had done had shattered in an instant a decade of admiration and trust. Still, standing up to his benefactor and teacher of a decade was still not the most pleasant of experiences for him.

O'Neill was surprised by the tenacity of the deacon's defense, and countered by raising his aggression.

"You dare baptize this man?" He gestured to Eret, Son of Eret with a look of disgust which was reciprocated. He was beginning to understand it had been unwise to use Norse to start the conversation, but knew he would deal what repercussions came with such a public display.

"Thisâ€|thisâ€|" O'Neill tapered off his attempt to insult Eret, Son of Eret and instead started a new train of thought towards Daniel.

"How dare you violate your station, insolent youth."

The crowd of Daniel's supporters started to tread their way out into the water, Snotlout's group joined them at a steady pace. While Astrid would have been glad to see the other Irish skinned alive, she knew the coming altercation could possibly result in a brawl between the two groups of Vikings, and she could not have civil discord on her hands. She started to quickly make her way down her sand dune and rushed off to the side of Daniel's group trying to get ahead of both of them. At the same time Daniel and O'Neill continued their debate.

"I am not an insolent youth father. Iâ€|.am a man of God. A true man of God, and as one I shall bring any person who deserves into the fold of the faith. Whether you agree or not"

Daniel kept as stern a look upon his face as possible as he proclaimed his confidence of self. The bishop was taken aback by the stubbornness, and knew his time to talk was limited as the Vikings from the shore grew closer. O'Gara grew more nervous as the swarm approached. Now was an especially inopportune time to be unarmed.

"Daniel, you surely cannot think that one who aligns himself with such heathens-riders of devils-can find redemption now? Surely you don't think that you -O'Neill pointed to Daniel accusatorily. -can redeem such people, and violate our very faith."

O'Neill tried moving closer to Daniel, but found his way blocked by Eret, Son of Eret. Even with a face covered in fish oil his expression was still intimidating, and enough to make the bishop keep his distance. Daniel moved his guard aside and approached O'Neill, standing up to his guide and teacher was proving a more exhilarating occurrence than he had ever thought it to be.

"Yes Stephen- O'Neill's eyes opened at the direct confrontation. - I do believe that this man, and all these people can be redeemed, whether they ride on the beasts or not. They are just as much God's creations as you...and I. Now if you'll excuse me, I would like to finish this baptism."

Daniel turned his back on the bishop, only to find both groups of Vikings that had approached him had stopped to view the confrontation. O'Rourke's rejection of the already unpopular bishop garnered a cheer from his followers, which in itself earned derision from Snotlout's group.

"Blasphemers!"

"Close minded warriors!"

"You've turned your backs on us all!"

"We do not reject, we accept!"

The two groups closed in, Astrid tried to make her way to a position to stop the two from clashing, noticing how one of the Irish was already trying to do.

"People, people please!" Let us stay reasonable here!"

O'Gara tried to put himself in between the two groups, a gesture that Astrid found some honor in even if she considered the rest of the Irish as a dishonorable collection. His stance was quickly disrupted as one from Snotlout's group with great zeal punched the knight across the jaw and tackled him into the water. As they wrestled beneath the waves, a familiar shrieking sound pierced the air, sending the other Irish to their knees and looking to the skies per instinct as a black streak soared over the two converging groups. As it passed, it left a cloud of green smoke which was quickly alit in a mild explosion convincing both groups to seek a proper distance. O'Gara and Snotlout's follower arose from the water unscathed, and each broke away from the other, knowing the circumstances had changed.

Astrid found Toothless slowly descending as Hiccup leaped off the dragon and managed an uneasy landing in the water, his metal leg sinking heavily into the sand but not enough to cause him to fall in. He scanned the scene in front of him with derision; the Irish were causing him yet another headache.

"And what in Odin's name is going on here?" He asked, genuinely being inexperienced with a situation as delicate as this. All stood silent for a moment before Astrid locked eyes with her husband, who implored an answer out of her with his expression. She was cut off by Eret, Son of Eret.

"My chief, I have chosen to be accepted into the Christian faith, and we were in the middle of performing the rite when the bishop interrupted us."

Eret, Son of Eret's news was unwelcome to Hiccup, but he could wait a moment to address it as he turned to the two factions of Vikings.

"And you all?" He posed with anger towards the two groups. Snotlout spoke for his companions.

"We were just trying to put a stop to it Hiccup, to preserve the integrity of the island.

"Liar!" Was the collective call from Daniel's followers, of whom Helga spoke for.

"They were going to attack Daniel, and all the rest of the Irish. They would have killed them all!"

Hiccup was well aware of the zealous hatred Snotlout and his companions held towards the Irish, and considered Helga's accusation well within the realm of possibility. Hiccup turned to his cousin, eager to get to the bottom of the chaotic situation.

"Snotlout, is this true?" Hiccup's stern tone- one he rarely used- was enough to warrant a collective huddling together amongst Snotlout's followers as the leader spoke.

"Well...he was gonna make Eret a Christian. We were just trying to protect the integrity of the village." Hiccup turned from his cousin's weak response to Daniel and Eret, Son of Eret, who both felt mutual discomfort at the spotlight now put upon them.

"Eret, you wish to become a Christian, yes?" Hiccup asked with hesitation.

"...Son of Eret, and yes my chief, I do." Eret, Son of Eret replied with a nervous confidence.

"I tried to put a stop to it chief Hiccup but the two of them were just so damned resistant." Bishop O'Neill spoke up, eliciting strong looks of distrust from all. Hiccup turned to the one he most suspected as being responsible for his poisoning with disdain, but curiosity as to why he was stopping one of his own practices.

"You...don't want this man to be a Christian?" Hiccup gestured to Eret, Son of Eret while he kept his gaze fixed on O'Neill.

"Of course not chief Hiccup! This man has not gone through all the proper rituals and rites needed to be properly baptized, and this one-He pointed with great anger towards Daniel. -has no right to baptize this man given his station."

Hiccup looked back for a moment at Eret, Son of Eret and Daniel. The last thing Hiccup wanted was to have anyone on Berk fully accepted into the foreign religion. Yet agreeing with a man for whom he felt such contempt like O'Neill was an equally disagreeable outcome. He turned back to look at the bishop, feeling a compulsion to reach for his sword which he fought himself to restrain.

He looked to beyond the bishop to Astrid, standing a way apart from both groups, looking cautiously to her husband and whatever move he made next in the conversation. If he agreed with O'Neill, it would certainly cause frustration in his own home. Defending the deacon would certainly appease his wife on the other hand. Why she was so

defensive concerning the deacon he was not quite sure, not that Astrid herself was any more so.

"Bishop, I..." Hiccup paused a moment, considering the weight of his words. He felt he was betraying himself in even considering them, but found he was put between two rather unlikeable scenarios at the moment.

"I will let this man become a Christian." Hiccup felt a great wave of discomfort overcome him, as did a rather large wave of water that unsettled the grip of his metal foot. A silence reigned over the scene for a moment before the bishop responded.

"No!"

"What?" Hiccup asked, unsure as to why one Christian was being so unwilling to support another.

"I refuse to see this man baptized! It is against all that we hold dear to us and-"

"Shut up!"

"Get out of here!"

Screams of intolerance and impatience came from Daniel's followers, Matthew, Mark and John closing in around the bishop for his own protection. O'Gara stayed where he was between the many groups, his fellow knights looking at him failing to understand his apprehensions.

"Poisoners!"

This one accusation made itself the most pronounced above all others, and with it the crowds grew silent a moment, each fearing the worst from each other now that the claim had been made.

"They poisoned the chief, they all did! The black robed one was in his house, he did it!"

"Do not say such things! Daniel would never hurt the chief!"

Hiccup and the bishop watched each other and the crowds as they tossed evidence and counterpoints back and forth concerning the theory. O'Neill felt a growing weakness in his legs, both from the great chill of the water and the fear that the crowd may get out of control.

Astrid approached the scene carefully. If things didn't get settled and quickly... she didn't want to think of the possibilities. The crowds approached each other again slowly, their clamor growing increasingly louder. Hiccup found himself unable to speak on the matter. He knew if he acknowledged his own suspicions of the Irish that Snotlout and his followers would have free reign to do as they pleased with the Irish. Not that he himself wouldn't mind that. But then there was Daniel, the so called "one good Irishman". Defending him meant defending this new religion, a still quite unsettling fact.

"Throw them all out!"

"Kill them all!"

"He's not one of them!"

"We have no proof of anything!"

The yelling, the argument and the personal stagnation of all was broken by a loud splash. All looked to Daniel O'Rourke, who a moment later pulled from beneath the waves Eret, Son of Eret, a trail of water arcing out of his hair as he resurfaced and wiped his eyes clean of the water and oil. All watched in disbelief as the deacon took a step aside from his friend and guard, standing with courage amidst the cold waters and gesturing to the collected Vikings in total disregard for the possible consequences of his abrupt actions.

"It is done. Who else will be saved?"

The simple words, spoken with a soft but determined voice were for a moment the only sounds made in the area save the crashing of the waves. Hiccup looked to the deacon with a slight admiration for his courage, but a deep aggravation at the complimentary arrogance such an action implied. The bishop looked on in disbelief, O'Conner whispering into his ear that their time to intervene was over, and they slowly drifted back to shore.

"I will!" Came a feminine voice from Daniel's crowd.

"Me as well!" Another voice, masculine in tone.

Hiccup watched as the whole of Daniel's followers approached him, shouting with joy and pride and begging for their own salvation beneath the dark sheen of the waters. He called Toothless to his side, and waded over to Astrid, still off to the side and as ambivalent as she had been at the start of the event. Hiccup turned back, his face falling into dejection and self loathing as Daniel began performing the sign of the cross over a woman and pouring some of what oil remained in his jar onto her head before submerging her large frame beneath the waves with Eret, Son of Eret's assistance.

"Hiccup..."

He looked back over to Astrid who sought to console her husband, knowing he had made a personally difficult decision. Hiccup, despite the deep love he held for his wife felt a stinging sense of irritation at her presence. It was she who had pleaded with him to protect Daniel in the first place, which had now extended to having his own villagers openly defying their gods of generations.

Why? Why defend him? He knew he was well within his right to deny her the wish of Daniel's safety. Yet he couldn't bring himself to disappoint her. He drew closer to her, Astrid sensing his consternation at the act going on behind him.

"Hiccup, I know it's hard but you..."

Can't fight this forever.

"... you did the right thing."

Astrid placed an arm around her husband in an effort to console. He had indeed done the right thing, at least from an objective sense. Astrid was unsure of herself as to why she wanted Daniel protected, but found it eased her nerves to see him unharmed. Snotlout's mob returned to shore defeated, the other Irish discreetly making themselves scarce. Daniel's followers surrounded him, all eager to be immersed in the cold waters. He was loved here indeed, a beautiful if dividing reality for all.

* * *

><p>The cold of the waters she had stood in soon permeated Astrid's entire body as she rode back home with Hiccup and Toothless. It was just as much a physical cold as it was an emotional one, both of herself and her husband. Her arms wrapped across his equally cool chest, trying to mutually warm each other. While their bodies did indeed find some relief in this closeness, Astrid could feel something was very wrong with Hiccup as they descended to the house and dismounted.<p>

Hiccup forwent the usual process of quickly removing Toothless' saddle, instead heading straight for the house in silence. Astrid followed, eager to get out of the wind which further lowered her body temperature. Toothless followed the two in as well, unsure why his master was in such a withdrawn state of mind.

As the two moved inward, Hiccup snapped his fingers at Toothless and then towards the hearth, which the dragon knew all too well was a signal for a small plasma blast. The violet sphere quickly brought a most welcome heat and illumination into the house, devoid of Valka as was standard for this time of day. While Astrid was quick to get close to the blaze as Toothless curled up next to it, Hiccup stood opposite the kitchen table in silent contemplation.

"So how was your flight?" Astrid asked, wanting to get her husband to talk. His silence discomfited her, but she knew full well what the issue on his mind was now. She tried to distract him with small talk. Hiccup remained silent, his head down and presenting Astrid with only his increasingly long hair of late to view as she turned back to him.

"Bet there were a lot of downed trees around the island after that storm."

Silence met her once again as she turned to the Night Fury curled up by its own fire.

"I'm willing to guess Toothless enjoyed the clear conditions out there today."

Unappealing silence pervaded. Astrid desperately hoped at least something she said could distract Hiccup. Toothless lifted his head to be scratched by Astrid upon hearing his name, the feel of fire against this back easing his reptilian mind and letting it not be concerned with the emotional stress that hung heavy in the room.

"Probably won't have that many good flying days left until-"

"Gods damnit!"

Hiccup slammed a fist down on the table with ferocity, raising his head to present a scowl of teeth and consternated expression. Astrid turned with the suddenness of the impact; Toothless perked his ears and remained attentive at the unexpected noise.

"What are you doing to me Astrid?"

Hiccup asked with an anger that veiled a deeper fear he held within. His scowl closed, only a worried frown now visible upon his face as Astrid rose to confront her emotional husband.

"Hiccup I-"

"No!" He interjected in his rage. "Just...ahhhhh." He moved to the side of the table, his metal leg pounding heavily on the floor. He stopped a short distance away from Astrid, and looked at her with pleading eyes, trying to phrase the question he wanted asked delicately enough so as both to elicit an answer and to not let Astrid know his darkest fears.

"Astrid...what's going on?"

She could see a glimmer of fear in Hiccup's expression, and composed herself carefully.

"W-What do you mean?"

Hiccup breathed heavily and shook his head, trying not to be too direct or harsh with Astrid but finding his emotions a difficult foe to defeat.

"You know damn well what I mean! Why are you defending him? Why you? Why now?"

Hiccup's voice rose with each question. Toothless looked on at the conversation with curiosity, unfamiliar at seeing his friend in such a distraught state, especially at his mate. Astrid absorbed the questions and saw through them to the raw anger and frustration they represented. They were valid questions indeed, ones she wasn't quite sure she had the answers to. She tried to craft her words delicately, knowing if she said something wrong it could lead to a great misunderstanding.

"Hiccup, I'm not defending him I'm-"

"Well that's all you have been doing since the Irish arrived! All I hear is how nice Daniel is and how we should experiment!"

Hiccup erupted into a newfound fury, pointing his finger with aggravation towards Astrid.

"Well? There's the result of your experiment!" He gestured to the door and the village that lay beyond it. "Now we've got a whole group of Christians out there! Happy now?"

"Of course not!" Astrid exclaimed more out of instinct than serious consideration.

"Well then why are you making me protect him?"

"I don't know!" It was the first thing she had been sure of all day. To admit such ambivalence angered her, and she turned this anger back on Hiccup.

"You don't have to do this! Be a man for God... 's sake!" She managed not to cringe at her dogmatic slip up, and was relieved to see Hiccup hadn't noticed. "Be a chief!"

Hiccup let his arm fall to his side and turned to lean slightly over the table, trying to control his voice. Astrid recovered from the anger directed towards her and her own mutual irritation and tried to approach him, a glance from Hiccup stopping her a few feet away. Initially one of warning, his visage fell to one indicating internal frustration.

"Astrid..." He took a moment to find the right words. "I just want to make you happy." He looked to her with an appearance that begged forgiveness as he exhaled heavily. "I saw you down there, and I just wanted to do what you wanted, and I thought this is what you wanted."

He swallowed, Astrid stood speechless at her husband's desperation. Was this what she wanted? She did not want to see her beloved in a state such as this, while at the same time she knew that it was in the end her requests that had led him to this.

"But Astrid, I don't get it. Why are you doing this Astrid?"

Hiccup steadied his posture and straightened himself, turning to Astrid in a calmer but still serious expression. He walked over to her, nerves temporarily calmed as he placed his hands on Astrid's shoulders.

"Why Astrid?"

She stood still, struggling to speak.

"Hiccup I..." She waited, both to ready her words and half expecting Hiccup to cut her off again. At recognizing now was her moment, she spoke.

"Hiccup, I...I just want what's...best. For everyone else. If this...if this makes them happy, if this is what makes the village happy...I'm just trying to-"

"But what about me...Astrid?" Hiccup asked as he tightened his grip on her shoulders, finding comfort in the touch. "This...this doesn't make ME happy." He broke away after the admittance, turning his back to Astrid as he walked back to the table.

"Everything's changing Astrid. I don't mean to be angry but...it's hard not to be." He turned back to her as she absorbed the words.

"It's like your toying with me Astrid, it's almost like you WANT everyone else to convert."

He drew closer again, a despondent expression upon his face.

"It's like you want to hurt me Astrid."

"Hiccup stop it!" Astrid suddenly burst out, insulted at the theory. Hiccup moved his head back at the sudden shriek as Astrid closed to him.

"Hiccup, I would never hurt you. I don't _want_ everyone to convert it's..." She whispered off, trying to find the right phrase, Hiccup waited in anticipation.

"He's a good man Hiccup. He's just a good man who wants to share his faith. Why is this so hard for you?"

Hiccup's head fell dejectedly, finding his own response as difficult to compose as Astrid's.

"Astrid, I can't lose you. I..." Astrid looked at Hiccup perplexed at the solemnity and morose tone with which her love spoke.

"I had...dreams Astrid. When I was asleep I...dreamt of you." He approached her slowly again.

"Everything that's happening Astrid, all...this...it's just not what I imagined life would be like. I never dreamt that things would change so quickly, so...dramatically."

He took a glance at Toothless, mentally noting how falling asleep for long periods of time was seemingly conducive to great changes on the island of Berk.

"I never thought I'd...I'd ever have to worry about you."

"Hiccup...Astrid began, growing irritated at her husband's gloomy mood."You have NOTHING to worry about. I know it's hard, I know it's difficult, and it is for me to. But Hiccup, this is just something we have to live with now, for better or worse."

Astrid made the final stride to regain a position of closeness to her husband, who only remained silent at Astrid's remarks. She knew it was hurting him, this change he couldn't stop. The guilt of her not so small role in this fact laid heavily on her. She could confront her own inner turmoil later, for now she sought only to alleviate that of her closest companion.

"It's a part of Berk now Hiccup."

"And you?" Hiccup asked quickly before Astrid could continue.

It was simple, yet loaded question. She made certain of herself not to look at the brooch that hung lightly over her left breast. What was she? What had she become? That Daniel meant something to Berk was an established fact. That he meant anything to her even in the most platonic sense was less certain. Astrid responded as fast as she could, hoping to not let any of Hiccup's other suspicions cause further strain upon them today. She placed a hand on his sternum and moved it upwards, caressing the crane of his neck before lightly grasping his chin, pulling him inward.

"I...will always love you Hiccup. And whatever you are, I am." A brief but well appreciated kiss went on between the two. Astrid pulled away, thinking the appropriate moment had passed. Hiccup instead wrapped his arms around her, holding her closely with a comfortable grip as he let out a sigh.

"Oh Astrid. Never change."

Astrid let the embrace go on, appreciating that the warmth she felt with him was both now physical and emotional. It was he and her alone, nothing but the bodies of two friends and lovers against another. All that divided them were their garments, and a golden brooch with three triangles that burned deeply into Astrid's heart.

* * *

><p>An axe spun quickly through the air, pivoting on its axis perfectly as it collided against the bark of an aged oak with a deep thud.<p>

It wasn't right.

The axe was removed, its wielder pivoting on the balls of her feet before throwing with just as much perfection at a nearby maple in the same instant, the result was the same.

It wasn't just.

The axe was again removed, taking some bark with its blade as it soon found itself being hurled against an unsuspecting elm.

It wasn't fair.

The axe missed, landing and ricocheting harmlessly off the ground. Astrid walked over, picked it up, and swung it forcefully into its intended target. She hated missing. It dug deep into the young tree. Finding it sturdy enough, she leaned back into the handle, resting her elbow on the flat of the blade as she took a breath and eased her muscles.

"I want you to stay away from him Astrid."

The walk through the forest to her preferred clearing for a workout had given Astrid time to think about and better take in the morning's events. People were openly rejecting the gods now. Hiccup wanted to blame this on her, she could tell from the way he had talked in such an uncharacteristic way to her. He wasn't himself right now. While some people were having a beneficial change of faith, Hiccup's change of heart could only be perceived as negative.

"I never thought I'd ever have to worry about you."

About what? Astrid hated the implication anything could happen to her. Yes, granted her actions in showing the other villagers and Eret, Son of Eret what Daniel had to say might have been fairly important in allowing Daniel's faith to gain a foothold on Berk but-

No. No buts about it. She had done this. This was her fault. It angered her that she could be the one to cause her husband this emotional pain. Why couldn't it have been anyone else? Why did she have to be the one to swoop down on him that one morning? Why did she have to ask him to read her a Psalm? Why did he have to be so damned fascinating to everyone, including herself?

Why did she not hate him?

She wanted to, more than anything in the world at the moment. All of this, the conflict, the doubts, the divisions, the emotional anguish was his entire fault by the fact of his existence.

And she couldn't bring herself to hate him. Despite everything he had caused, she knew Daniel to be essentially good. He gave hope and excitement to the village unlike anything she had seen since the end of the dragon war six years ago. He spoke words of wisdom and beauty that tantalized and fascinated her.

If only they had been about Odin, everybody would have welcomed him with open arms.

No, instead he had to follow only one God, who seemed to create more factions than an entire pantheon in civil war. Why couldn't he have lost his stupid book in the ocean?

More importantly, why did she care?

She had seen and continued to mull over the fear she had witnessed in Hiccup earlier. Though it was hard for her to admit to herself, she understood Hiccup's true fear.

He didn't trust her.

It infuriated her that he would even think that. To imply anything could possibly break her away from him and throw her into the arms of an Irishman was damned insulting. She got up from her lean and ripped out her axe from the young elm before smashing it back into the tree again.

"Damnit Hiccup!"

She pulled out and swung the axe furiously into the tree again and again, alternating each strike with a word.

"Why...don't...you...trust...me!"

She continued to swing in silence several more times until the tree began to falter under its own weight, falling lightly to the ground and pulling nearby branches down along with it. She breathed heavily with the extra effort, with it expelling her emotional energy.

She and Daniel. The very thought unnerved her to the core. Was this really what he thought, what he expected from her of all people? The first one to trust him, the first human arguably outside his parents to care about him? The first and so far only girl to kiss him, among other things? His own wife? How could he be so insecure? So unsure of himself, and of her?

Friends and only that. Why didn't Hiccup see that? He would surely have to come to accept this change on the island eventually. He would have to accept Daniel eventually. Accept the faith eventually. Accept the faith, just like Eret, Son of Eret and Helga and-

"Oh Astrid. Never Change."

She looked to the brooch that still lay above her heart. A brooch that quietly mocked her in how it represented everything that hurt her husband. She unclipped and threw it to the ground quickly in an instinctual desire to remove the pain from herself. The three triangles still held true, still mesmerized her with the luster of their golden sheen and the basic yet captivating geometric display.

Acceptance. It was Hiccup's most cherished ideal. Why couldn't he show it now? She wished, she hoped that Hiccup could get past his inane fear of her disloyalty and just come to love Daniel as she did.

She loved Daniel.

Her face collapsed as she thought it, recognizing her true feelings. Her fidelity, her innocence, her life and body belonged to Hiccup, this was true. Her spirit, her soul was captured by an Irish drifter. More importantly, by his God. One God, Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth.

She reached down and picked up the brooch again, refastening it above her breast while brushing off the dirt it had taken on in her throw. These three triangles may indict her as a convert in time, but she would continue to wear them proudly for the time being. She had to make Hiccup see past his fears, his doubts, his apprehensions. Make him see the good in this one Irishman, all the while still figuring out a plan of vengeance against the others.

Her axe slipped down her side as she calmed herself. She looked behind her to the small path that would lead her out of the forest, back to the village, back to Hiccup and Daniel. She had to reconcile the two. She had caused this; she had to make this right.

She arced her back and cracked her neck, a beam of sunlight piercing the rapidly dying foliage and shining brightly in her face.

"Please Hiccup, please just accept this."

She took a breath, closed her eyes, and brought her axe back to a sturdier position as she took a step forward.

"Please...God."

* * *

><p>A slim knife cut vigorously through the fresh carcass of a salmon, it was pulled back hard over the cutting board in preparation for the next cut.<p>

"It wasn't right."

The knife came down again in another firm chop, catching and

crunching under its might a small bone that had failed to be removed in the de-boning process earlier.

_It wasn't jus_t.

The knife quickly moved over and sliced through the fish again, the fingers that held the salmon pressed down on it with vigor, squeezing the juices out of the light red flesh in manifested discontent.

It wasn't fair.

Hiccup looked down at the neatly sliced and prepared fish before lifting up the cutting board and bringing it to a cauldron, sliding the chunks into the broth that bubbled lightly above the blaze which Toothless still protected with pacific fervor. Hiccup negotiated around the dragon's awkward size and position as he slid the lid back on the cauldron, stumbling on his fake leg and catching himself on the table, grunting under the sudden near fall. Toothless raised his head in concern.

"Yeah I'm alright bud."

Hiccup righted himself and stretched his back as he let out a sigh.

Why didn't he trust her? He knew her to be better than this. He was acting paranoid, as if he hadn't known Astrid all his life and shared a bed with her for the past year. It wasn't just his more extreme and even he had to admit fantastical notion of her being disloyal to him that was upsetting. It was rather more simple than that, more down to Earth, and yet beyond Earth at the same time.

It was much too simple to cause him such anguish.

Astrid could become a Christian.

He might have to become a Christian.

In all fairness he didn't have to. He could live out his life just as he always had, still be chief of Berk, still ride Toothless, still share his bed with Astrid.

He'd just be sharing his bed with a Christian. A foreign God would be forever in his home and forever in his life.

He really couldn't live out his life as he always had.

It wouldn't be that bad, would it? Yes he had gone his entire life giving libation and loyalty to Thor and Freya, but certainly it couldn't be a decision bad enough to incur the god's wrath. He knew if she did turn, did turn away from the old gods it would be difficult for a time, perhaps a long time.

It wasn't even that he could think of anything bad to say about Daniel, or the faith for that matter. But it was just so...foreign. All his life everything he had known was the pantheon that had guided him these last two decades, had watched over him and protected him amidst everything, from his early years of abuse to the Red Death to Alvin to Dagur to...Drago.

He looked to Toothless, back to his rest in front of the cooking blaze. His mind drifted for a moment to the Battle of the Sanctuary where the gods had seemed to abandon him, had taken something from him in such a cruel way. Where the gods had turned their backs on him. Would he be in the wrong to turn his back on them in some twisted form of spiritual vengeance?

Life couldn't stay the same now, it simply couldn't. He only wished Astrid had not had to be at the centre of this. That and this new faith did come with the extra baggage personified in O'Neill.

O'Neill, the very thought of him made Hiccup clench the knife still in his hand before stabbing it into the table which made a light thud. The notion of his poisoning being at his hands, which he was absolutely sure of by now made it difficult not to just call for his execution immediately. Still, there was no proof, no witnesses, only circumstance.

What then of the future? He lets his assailants slip from his hand, lets the island embrace their God and then what? Astrid had been right all along. He knew there were certainly going to be more Irish and Scots and other Christians coming in the future. They probably had already been on the island before, perhaps acting under guises and false names. Still, these select Irish had to pay, O'Neill especially.

Such an action would certainly appeal to a sizeable corps of the village, especially Snotlout's brigade. He remembered he would have to deal with Snotlout at some point later that day given his tendency to resort to violence around the Irish. Not that Hiccup could entirely blame him. He was just doing what Hiccup wanted, unrestrained by the niceties Hiccup's personality and station forced upon him.

There Hiccup decided laid the crux of his frustration. It wasn't Daniel or O'Neill, but the fact that harming one would lead to harm of the other. He wanted to hurt O'Neill, but Daniel by his presence was forbidding him. Hiccup had to put an end to Snotlout's insistence on violence in dealing with Christians, make him see the possible benefits of Daniel.

Hiccup sighed as he realized his intentions. Daniel was certainly having a beneficial effect on the village. Astrid had been right again, and perhaps honest when she said she was only doing what she was doing for the sake of the village. If he wanted to make Astrid happy, to make the village happy, he had to put a stop to this aggression and at the same time still find vengeance. He had already allowed people to become baptized; he certainly suspected his now determined intentions.

Protect Daniel, protect the Christians.

Turn his back on the gods in the name of change. If his father could change on three hundred years of Viking relations with dragons, it was certainly within the realm of possibility for him to change three hundred years of Viking relations with the gods. Hel, there were probably other tribes and kingdoms that already had converted. Maybe he was behind on the times. If Astrid, the most Viking like Viking in the history of Vikings could possibly embrace this, he resolved

himself that- in time- he could as well.

He turned back and leaned down to Toothless, the dragon managing his iconic smile to greet the close presence of his friend.

"Well bud, what do you say? Think you want to be a Christian?"

The dragon extended his tongue and gave Hiccup a lick across the face. The chief simply absorbed the saliva quietly as his hair stood on end.

"My thoughts exactly."

13. The Enemy of My Enemy

"What do you mean delay?"

"Winds last night damaged my aft mast and drove my hull into some rocks, and I need to apply some tar there as well as replace a few boards. Just need a few days to get it repaired and then we'll be off."

The lack of concern Trader MacAfee showed for both his own and more importantly for O'Neill's situation irritated the bishop.

"I understand your situation but need I remind you we are in a less than opportune position here? Speed is of the essence my friend."

"Yes your holiness, I understand this..." MacAfee said stiffly, not caring for his act of charity being rushed. "But it is what it is, now if you'll excuse me I'd like to get on with these repairs that you so desperately desire. You're welcome to help if you want."

MacAfee turned with a flair of attitude and walked the gangplank back up to his ship. O'Neill's scowl which he had worn since that morning went uninterrupted as the four knights waited anxiously for a moment, unsure whether or not to take up the trader on his request for assistance.

"So...a few more days in paradise then?" Mark spoke up, trying to alleviate the situation much in the same way his brother typically did.

"Depends on one's definition of paradise." John added in an effort to keep the conversation moving along. The attempt failed as O'Neill turned back to them with his disappointed glower.

"Come on then, I suppose its back to the warehouse for us." He waved an arm over his shoulder to gesture the knights forward. One hesitated.

"You lads go on ahead, I'll be up in town a while." Though devoid of anything inflammatory, O'Gara's remark stopped the other four in their tracks as they turned back to the dissenter.

"What?" John inquired with mild irritation at Luke's antagonism.

"Going to see your new lass is it?" Matthew said with a sly smile of dirty implications.

"Oh shut up Matthew." O'Gara snapped back at the jesting youth. Ruffnut was not the reason he was abandoning his comrades for the day. Well, not the only reason. She wasn't that bad when one got to know her, and the lack of feeling in Luke's jaw made kissing her a mostly tolerable experience.

"Why would you want to be heading into town? At now of all times?" O'Neill demanded an answer from the knight, who moved forward slowly in an effort to slip past the four and make his way off the docks.

"Well I just thought I would...uh...just check up on...uh...Daniel. Make sure the villagers haven't...you know..." O'Gara made a lighthearted crossing of his neck with his fingers. His words did nothing to part the four in his way, John widening his stance at realizing Luke's intentions.

"And why would we, or you care about that?" O'Neill inquired with bitterness, the thought of Daniel's disobedience that morning still freshly stinging in his mind.

Luke tried to find some words that would bring him out of this situation unscathed, and found himself dismayed at finding none.

"Oh...well..."

"Trying to get baptized again?" John cut Luke off. Though not the most well crafted accusation, it still spoke to the uncomfortable notion that O'Gara had tried to reconcile the two groups of angry Vikings earlier, which hinted at some sympathy towards the group of converts, and so to Daniel .

"I...I've no reason to seek another baptism if that's what your implying." Luke managed nervously. "Now if you'll excuse me..." Luke took a feigned step to his right, drawing John that way before alternating to the left and leaping to and off of a support pillar of the wharf, now ahead of his fellow Celts and freedom within his grasp.

"I'll...see you lads later." With light feet he made for a quick walk off the wharf and up towards town as the other Irish looked on in confusion

"What's gotten into him, besides the girl?" Mark jested in the same vein of his brother. O'Neill attempted to move the conversation into a more serious direction.

"I think it is not a woman, but a man who holds our knight's heart."

The bishop's attempt at flowery language earned him views of disgust and bewilderment from the other knights.

"I mean Daniel you idiots."

The looks persisted.

"I mean he...Daniel and his heresy holds more influence over him now than does our righteousness. Now pray for your souls."

The knights obeyed and took a moment to bow their heads and mutter a short prayer before seeking further guidance from the bishop.

"And what are we to do about it?" Matthew inquired. The knights were aware that the bishop had been planning something for the past few days in keeping to his word of bringing about an end to the present situation, but they had so far been left in the dark on the matter.

"Daniel is a lost cause to our noble endeavor, and it would appear that Luke too has been enticed by the devils that surround us. They have gone to defacing our faith by tainting it with a respect for Lucifer's spawn. "

"Traitor." John interjected, making his dislike of Luke as well known as ever.

"Indeed my child. Indeed." Thoughts of historical betrayals ran through O'Neill's mind as he continued to formulate his vengeance for his companions dogmatic breach. He took notice of a helmeted figure that stood on the hill overlooking the docks, watching the Irish with malice and keeping track of their every move. Slowly but with certitude a plot developed, the knights looking on the silent figure of their bishop with interest.

"Oh Trader Sven?"

MacAfee emerged from his ship a moment later, irritated at being disturbed from his work as the knights looked between the two with curiosity.

"What?" He was terse, wishing the bishop would say his point and leave him be to repairing his ship.

"I do believe my knights would like to take you up on your offer of assistance."

The three knights looked to the bishop and then amongst themselves, interested at where the bishop was going and begrudged that physical labor may lay ahead of them.

"Really, well then tell them to get up 'ere and help me."

"But trader, surely you do not expect knights to act like common serfs? They are after all of noble birth."

MacAfee's eyes narrowed, catching on to what the bishop was implying and finding it an egregious demand.

"That's low talk for a man of your stature."

"All I'm saying is that a little token of appreciation would suffice given their time and effort."

"And me saving your skins from a bunch of heathens isn't enough?"

MacAfee made a strong argument, the bishop in turn changed tactics.

"Think of it not as full payment, but as insurance. Just to make sure you sail off without us. Just a little something, as a sign of trust."

"Are you saying you don't trust me your holiness?"

"Considering you don't use false names to do trade with these heathens I would not be talking about trust. I trust you, MacAfee, but not trader Sven."

MacAfee held a vindictive stare at the bishop before turning back into the hold of his ship a moment.

"How is this a plan?" Matthew leaned over to the bishop to ask.

"Have faith that your labors will pay off in time my child."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

"Don't I always?"

Matthew decided that silence was better than an answer in this situation, and his sarcasm was heard only by himself.

MacAfee returned from the hold a moment later and tossed from the gangplank a moderately sized pouch, caught by Mark and in turn handed to O'Neill. The bishop looked inside to find a fair amount of silver coin nestled cozily into the felt.

"Will that serve you well your holiness?" MacAfee bitterly asked.

"Plenty well trader Sven, now do enjoy the assistance."

The bishop looked to the knights, who groveled lowly and made their way up the gangplank. O'Neill was doubly relieved to have both the money and a certainty of escape from Berk. He looked back up the hill from the docks to the helmeted figure that still looked down upon him vigorously with eyes of daggers. O'Neill gathered his courage and made his way to confront Snotlout Jorgenson.

* * *

><p>Snotlout didn't get it. He didn't get Hiccup, never had and he was convinced he never would. The recent arrival of the Irishmen to Berk had at least made him consider the possibility that he would understand Hiccup's actions, in that he assumed they would be the same as his own.<p>

Recent events had made him realize once again that he would never understand Hiccup.

Even despite their close blood bond, the two were quite the opposite in nearly every category. Snotlout's muscles were as large as Hiccup's head, whose brain was in turn stronger than his. Snotlout had weight and stature on his side whereas Hiccup had speed and a

lean figure that had refused to expand anymore for the past two years. He was Snotlout's antithesis, and until the Red Death his inferior.

Hiccup had been the first, the first Viking to trust and train a dragon. Whole new worlds had opened up for him since then. Not that Snotlout didn't love Hookfang like he was his kin, didn't enjoy the feeling of flight and enjoyed the prosperity that had come to Berk in recent years.

But it was all because of Hiccup. Everything that had been promised Snotlout since he had first beat the wind out of Hiccup when they were both two years old, everything that he had dreamed of would have been his upon inheriting the chieftdom was well within sight six years ago.

Then Hiccup had happened.

The chieftdom that he had been assured would be passed to him had been guaranteed to the first dragon rider and son of the chief.

The glory and recognition that should have been his was always superseded by that belonging to the first dragon rider.

The wife that should have been his was deflowered and taken by the first dragon rider.

The Uncle he had loved like his father was dead because of the arrogance of the first dragon rider.

His fidelity was still to Hiccup, and he did care for him much like anyone would their chief and cousin. He couldn't complain much about his life at the moment, but the blackest part of his soul still held vain hopes for the fame he so desired. They were mostly suppressed in his waking thoughts, channeled instead into the loyalty and pride that came in being named one of the chief's huscarls.

Suppressed, for the most part.

Then the Irish came. He had been like the rest of the village at the start and didn't trust them. Now he found himself in an increasingly small minority who wanted to see them all dead.

They were an infestation, a contaminant that threatened to destroy all of Berk, all he had ever known now rested in the hands of his cousin the chief. Hiccup had to stop this new faith and drive the Irish out.

Instead he was allowing the filth to talk their blasphemy, allowing the people of Berk to be wooed by a damned youth who controlled the magic to move through fire. Taking his sweet time in punishing the others who all were certain had poisoned him. Such treachery enraged Snotlout almost as much as the false words against the gods they spread. Why couldn't Hiccup just be the man Snotlout wanted him to be, which was himself? He had never known Hiccup to lack piety and trust in Freya and Thor and Odin, and he was certain it was had kept the youth going during his turbulent years before he met Toothless. Yet now he was allowing their beloved pantheon to be subverted, allowing people to turn away from their protectors and benefactors of generations all because one damned Irishman could walk through

fire.

In retrospect Snotlout could concede that the stunt had not been one of his better ideas. A dark thought occurred to him, that by allowing such a display to go on he may have inadvertently caused more to convert than may have by this point.

Not that he could pin that much blame on himself. When he thought about it by his own logic the only reason he had attempted such a stunt had been because Hiccup hadn't kept a tighter leash on the Irish in the first place. He was allowing their faith to spread, allowing the deacon to gain popularity. It disgusted Snotlout just how easily so many of the villagers were willing to give up their gods so quickly in the presence of this one Irishman. Even if he wasn't the most pious man in the village, Snotlout at least understood that one simply did not turn their backs on the gods lightly, and not without repercussions.

He looked down on the Irish on the docks with aggression and irritation. Why couldn't Hiccup just have done what he should have done and kept them locked up under guard in the warehouse the moment they started to spread their faith? Instead he had one under his roof, as if personally protecting and worse condoning the blasphemy that was infecting the island.

One of the Celts beneath his gaze broke loose from the pack and made his way towards the village. It was the one who had stolen Ruffnut's heart. Snotlout would be lying to himself if he didn't believe that the presence of that one alone on the island didn't upset him greatly. To see the object of his longings and affections-once he had gotten over Astrid's unavailability- stolen so quickly by an admittedly apt and intriguing warrior from another land was irritating. Having that thief be of a different faith only made it all the more so.

Then there was the deacon, who more directly frustrated Snotlout more than any single one of the Gaels. He couldn't understand why so many villagers were flocking to him, besides the fact that he had walked through Hookfang's blaze. There was nothing particularly remarkable about him, nothing about his person gave off a sense of his supposed connection to his God. There was nothing commanding or decidedly impressive about his person or the way he carried himself. If anything he looked weak, reserved, awkward, and unlike anything that to him would constitute a respectable man.

Just like Hiccup.

Just like the first dragon rider who had taken everything from him and was allowing this foreigner to ruin the sanctity of the island.

Snotlout noticed that the leader of the Irish was marching up the hill unguarded. He seemed to be approaching him, piquing Snotlout's curiosity. He had not seen this bishop without at least one knight by his side since they had washed ashore. The bishop must have known Snotlout didn't like him, and the Viking couldn't fathom why now at all times the aging man was approaching him alone.

"Well good afternoon sir." The bishop exclaimed as he caught his breath after the steep climb up the hill. Snotlout stood silent a

moment as the bishop came closer.

"Overall a nicer day than last wouldn't you-"

"What do you want, filth?"

O'Neill raised an eyebrow at the direct confrontation, keeping a smug and confident demeanor. He decided to get right to his point in seeing that the Viking was intent on the same. He gathered a mouth of air and began his proposal.

"I am well aware of your certain distaste for us good sir."

"Well you've got that right." Snotlout interjected, hoping to throw the bishop off his game. It was a failed endeavor against the cunning that typifies certain Celts.

"Indeed I do. I am also aware of your very specific distaste for our deacon, the one who lives under the house of the chief."

"Yes." Snotlout let the word draw out a few seconds, uncertain where the Gael was going with the conversation. The bishop continued without missing a beat.

"You and your group's behavior this morning was quite an impressive display of fervor and conviction. I am very impressed."

The bishop turned and paced back and forth in front of Snotlout as he continued.

"You see my most distinguished huscarl, I'm afraid our deacon has done a great wrong against our faith. It saddens me that he has accepted members of your island into our faith."

Snotlout tilted his head in interest, subduing his desire to inflict pain on the Gael in the sake of interest in the apparent hypocrisy of the Irishman.

"How so?"

O'Neill knew he had the Viking's interest, and continued.

"To see a man I had once trusted to embody all I hold dear about my faith sacrifice all that we believe in to ally himself with the riders of dragons is disconcerting. His actions represent blasphemy of the highest order to us, it is quite reprehensible."

Snotlout liked the way "reprehensible" rolled off the bishop's tongue with just the slightest trill of malice.

"I would want nothing less than to see everything we cherish spat and trampled on by our deacon's insistence on accepting your island into our faith. It unsettles me greatly."

While Snotlout was interested in this outpouring of grief by the Celt, he remained skeptical of the bishop's reasons for proclaiming such things.

"And why are you telling me this?"

"I am sure you have heard that the rest of my companions will be leaving your island soon, yes?"

"I look forward to it." Snotlout responded, keeping his bitter anger against the group as a whole present in the back of his mind.

"Yes, but I am told by one of my knights that our deacon will not be joining us, that he insists on staying on this island and committing a great heresy against both of us."

Snotlout squinted in interest at the bishop's comparison between the two of them.

"And where am I fitting into this?"

O'Neill smiled at the question and went forward with his plan.

"I understand you want to see the deacon's heresy put to an end just as much as I do. However, your chief is preventing you from doing so as we both saw this morning. It is then in the spirit of mutual satisfaction I am proposing an agreement between our two interests."

O'Neill let a moment of silence pass between the two as Snotlout considered whether or not hearing the Irishman out. On the one hand he was one of the many Snotlout hated, and was certainly responsible for Hiccup's poisoning. On the other hand, disposing of that which threatened the holiness of the island was tempting.

"What kind of agreement, you poisoning scum?" O'Neill merely brushed off the accusation, which to Snotlout was more proof of his guilt. Still, he listened to the bishop in what he considered the noble cause of preserving the old gods.

"At the time prior to our leaving, we simply request you provide us with an opportunity and the means to properly remove our mutual enemy from your island."

"And bring him back to Ireland?"

"Someplace better." O'Neill quickly added with a faint grin.

Snotlout considered the offer a moment. He didn't trust any Irishman at all, but he held specific distaste both for the bishop and the deacon. One had injured his cousin, one was an affront to the gods.

"Why should I trust you?"

O'Neill tossed the felt bag he had recently obtained to the Viking, who caught and opened it to find a fine collection of silver coins looking back at him.

"You think I can be bribed, pest?"

"Of course not, but I know that you already trust me as I do you."

Snotlout tightened his brow at the statement.

"What makes you think I trust you?"

"Because I approached you, the one who hates me the most and wishes to see me dead with open arms and have asked him to commit a small act of treason against the wishes of his chief, and despite the knife I see at your side and the fact that nobody is watching you haven't killed your defenseless enemy yet."

Snotlout took a glance around himself. They were alone. He could certainly kill the bishop now, but that would still leave the deacon to deal with. Killing one would mean letting the other go, neither were particularly good options.

"Then why the coin?"

"Insurance in case we fail, a guarantee of our determination."

"You really trust me that much?"

"Well I am still standing here."

The bishop made a good point. While the value of the coin was of minimal concern to Snotlout, the bishop's offer was quite tempting. All he had to do was give the Irish the opportunity, and Daniel would be removed from the island. It would be safe from his blasphemy, and all the Irish would be gone. He could single handedly save the island and the gods from destruction.

Glory would be his for once.

"So just give you the means and location, and you'll quietly sneak him away back to Ireland?"

"Again, we have better places than Ireland to send him."

Snotlout was unsure of the exact meaning of the bishop's words, but his pride and determination were quick to reply.

"I hate your guts, but I hate his more."

Snotlout found the bishop's hand boney and frail, but sensed in them a desire for malice and vengeance. He could certainly sympathize.

* * *

><p>As much as he loved them, Daniel found a respite from his group of followers was necessary from time to time for the sake of relaxation. While being around Astrid certainly didn't make him much more relaxed, the presence of her husband and mother-in-law did to some degree quell his inner tension, if only out of fear and respect. He rested his head against a fist with one arm, and rested his other arm on his bible, slowly tapping out a melody to a hymn he couldn't for the life of him remember the name to.<p>

The room was warm, very warm. The hearth blazed with well aged pine wood that let out a pleasant aroma. Toothless remained curled up near the blaze, enjoying being warmed both externally and internally to temperatures that any human would find oppressive if not deadly.

Daniel could feel the heat emanating out of his core and through his robes. What was the name of that hymn? He could feel his body being pummeled by the warmth that reflected off the walls. His body seemed on fire, as if thrown into the fires of Hell itself. If this was hell, he wasn't complaining, much.

Astrid and Valka whirled around him preparing dinner for the four of them. Hiccup was upstairs tending to village matters, trade manuals, draconic affairs, Daniel.

He knew full well he was as much a matter for the chief's concern as anything else. His impact on the day's events weighed heavily on his consciousness, almost as much as the name of this elusive hymn title. He had certainly angered both his host and his bishop that morning in his defiance. It felt oddly satisfying to defy the will of one, yet humbling to do the same to another.

The room grew warmer, he felt he was burning on the inside, as cooked as the soup that was being prepared. How did the bridge to the hymn go again?

Astrid stepped into the periphery of his vision, even as he kept it towards the table he couldn't help but note the way the leather tassels of her skirt spun as she reached behind Valka to grab a plate for bread. The hard and well structured hide clacked together as it fell back into position as she steadied, leaning forwards to get a plate. The skirt curved around her back in a way that...

Focus!

If this was Hell, he wasn't complaining much. Still, the heat he felt was its own form of Hell. An internal and rising heat, one which meditation did not cool. What was the name of the hymn? He couldn't care less, he was too hot for such matters. He was too hot, and perhaps he could find some way for Astrid to...

Focus!

"Long day deacon?" Valka asked as she brought another plate to the table in preparation for dinner. Daniel looked up slowly, curious as to how the day's events had not yet reached the woman; though relieved that being broken from his thoughts seemed to cool his soul, if not his body. She cracked a smile.

"Ah I'm joking you lad. Heard all about it."

O'Rourke was glad he wouldn't have to relate the entirety of the long day to the woman, and instead he turned back to his weary state, trying to remember where he had left off in the hymn and trying to remember why he cared when he could instead fixate on how the leather tassels seemed to bounce as Astrid walked, like a shifting curtain that drew attention up from her legs to the swaying leather that concealed her...

Focus idiot!

"Yeah, it was a long day or everyone." Astrid spoke up, immediately drawing Daniel's attention at the sound. She smiled at his attention

as she placed a bowl of salmon soup on the table before making her way to the stairs.

Steam rose of the bubbling, creamy liquid. Daniel looked back to the table, feeling ever warmer.

"Hiccup, dinner!"

She turned back and took a seat as Valka did the same. Daniel looked at her upon her request, forcing himself to retain his composure amidst anxiety. Why couldn't she just let him keep to himself and avoid her visage? Why was she forcing this temptation upon him? Why was it so damn warm in this house?

The door to the bedroom opened and was followed by a steady series of thumps as Hiccup descended, his body appearing out of the shadows that wrapped around the doorway like a phantom through mists.

"Smells edible."

He managed a slight smile at Astrid as he took his seat. He noted to himself that it was very warm in the kitchen, understandable considering the ferocity of the hearth. It was relieving for a moment, but he felt it would make him uncomfortable if he stayed in it too long. He opted to eat as quickly as he could, not wishing to become trapped in a sauna.

The four began to each take their respective servings from the bowls and plates before them. Astrid went before Daniel, her fingertips lightly nudging his own as she passed him the ladle. Daniel kept his head down and took his serving. The soup was scalding, heat rising slowly from within it to bubble lightly at the surface. Daniel never felt he would empathize with soup before, but felt the liquid held sympathy for his plight as he ladled it into his bowl.

Astrid, Valka and Hiccup all began to dig into their soup. Daniel in keeping true to his faith took out the cross from beneath his robe and held it before him as he usually did, making the sign of the cross over his bowl and muttering a prayer in Latin.

Hiccup held his spoon midway between his bowl and his mouth, looking on at the sight. He had spoken with Astrid again that afternoon. He had heard her case, had spent nearly an hour carefully analyzing her pleas, her defense of the merits of Daniel. She had been careful not to admit to her own interest in the faith, only defending the others villagers interest in Daniel and professing his innocence in action and intention.

Hiccup could feel the icon of Freya behind him, its eyes burning into his back. His back felt warm, his body felt warm, the room was too damn warm.

He was tolerating Daniel, per Astrid's request. Still, the sight of Daniel and the presence of his faith required getting used to. Valka had noticed the pause in Hiccup's eating, and in doing so had paused herself. Daniel, on finishing his prayer had too noticed the quiet brought about by the absence of noisy soup consumption. He looked to Hiccup with mild concern as he leaned forward.

"I...I'm sorry Chief Hiccup if this-"

"Nope, you're fine."

Hiccup quickly raised his hand to the deacon, preferring to cut him off than to let him finish. The Chief proceeded to get back to his soup, Valka did the same. As Daniel turned back to his own he caught Astrid's gaze, sympathetic to his plight but keeping reserved in her demeanor.

She was relieved that the issue had gone by without any real conflict, and that Hiccup was at least trying to accommodate him. Her conversation with him that afternoon had been tense, but fruitful. She had seen in him both a devotion to her opinion of matters, while there still lingered an understandable apprehension. He had agreed to be moderate, to let Daniel stay for now. While part of him seemed at least somewhat happy at the statement, at the same time such a declaration had caused him to stumble on the very words. She tried to break the silence, preferring interaction to mulling on the fate of a guest.

"So, how did the talk with Snotlout go?"

Hiccup had set out later that afternoon to track down his cousin and put an end to his calls for violence. Astrid could tell something about the conversation was on her husband's mind.

"Eh, well I guess. I mean he agreed to put an end to rallying the crowds against any of the Irish, including him." Hiccup gestured with his spoon to Daniel, who kept his head down and ate slowly, finding the soup was even hotter than the room around him.

"Well that's good."

"Yeah." Hiccup managed weakly as he took another spoonful of soup. Astrid caught on to the uncertainty in his voice and pressed on.

"What happened?"

"It's not really that anything happened, it's the fact that not much did happen. He just kind of...accepted it. Didn't really fight it much at all. Just gave me his word he'd stop and then he trudged off, and that was it."

Hiccup's recount did strike Astrid as noticeably odd. Given his various attempts at bringing the island to rebellion, for Snotlout to give up on something he was so impassioned about was quite peculiar.

"That's...odd."

"Yeah. But hey, as long as he stays docile for the time being I don't care what madness afflicts him."

"As long as he stops that's fine for me."

A moment of silence paused as all got back to eating. Daniel, implored by the silence to break it decided to add to the presumed finished conversation. His breath felt hot from the soup, hot breath

going out into a hot room.

"That's fine for me too."

The words filled the air and hung in it for several moments, all unsure on how to proceed. Astrid was the first to attempt to gain any momentum.

"Yeah, it's good for you especially."

Daniel managed a smile at the statement before turning quickly back to his hot dinner.

"Yeah, especially good for him." Hiccup added at a decibel barely above a whisper before taking another spoonful. Astrid could hear the slightest hint of sarcasm in his voice, and knew full well he was continuing to weigh the possible benefits of Daniel going about his business on Berk unscathed.

It was not Hiccup's intention necessarily to cause Daniel to feel unwelcome, but even after his acceptance of current circumstances earlier that day he found accepting his own acceptance a difficult task.

The idol of Freya was staring at him, her eyes burning into his back. He felt increasingly warm, both from external and internal forces. He shouldn't be this way, he should be more accepting, more willing to accept everything around him. He was embarrassed by himself, by his own actions. He felt warmer as a result.

It had been one thing to host Daniel when he was just a freely exchanged person passed from O'Neill's hands to his own. It was another for him to be given special protection and allowed to change the faith of his island by using Hiccup's house as a base of operations.

Freya was watching him, watching him turn away. Her eyes watched him and burned into his back. He felt warmer still.

The room having again gone silent, Valka insisted on filling it again with sound to break the tension Hiccup had caused with his words. Those she decided to use were not of the best subject.

"So Daniel, looks like your fellows are heading back home soon."

"Yeah." Was all the deacon managed between hot spoonfuls. This was not enough for Valka, who pressed for more.

"Going to be missing any of them?"

Astrid and Hiccup, though their faces were neutral paid close attention to O'Rourke's response. The deacon had paused a moment, had grabbed a piece of bread from a plate, and began to tear it, finding its center as warm as the room around him. Why was everything so hot?

"I suppose Luke O'Gara, we're somewhat friends. He's the only one I can say I'd be sad to see go."

"No others?"

"No, me and the other knights never really got along too well. I mostly just kept busy with the other deacons and the bish-op"

Daniel was too late to catch himself from bringing up the subject. Astrid widened her eyes slightly as she noticed Hiccup had rested his spoon in his bowl. Daniel dipped some bread in his soup and chewed through it quickly despite its scalding temperature anticipating confrontation. It was quick to arrive.

"Close to O'Neill at some point were you?" Hiccup asked. He felt warm blood surge through him, frustrated that he was so frustrated, loathing his own loathing, warmed by his own warmth.

Daniel took a moment to savor his bread and compose a response, knowing he had to phrase things delicately.

"Well...not so much close as...friends I suppose but as...I guess as close as one can be considering our mutual circumstances."

Daniel motioned with his hand to Toothless, curled up near the fire, uninterested in begging for soup, which he had learned long ago he did not like. Astrid and Hiccup caught on to his implications, and inquired further.

"Yet you're very different people." Astrid added. Daniel looked up to her and responded quickly.

"Yes."

An abrupt silence overtook the room again following the deacon's statement. Though he had settled matters temporarily, Daniel could feel his skin burning with anxiety and nervousness, not to mention this uncomfortable warmth inside him. He knew his host's hatred, could feel it ebb off of him, or maybe that was just the heat. He could see the desire for vengeance in his eyes, or maybe that was just the steam rising from the soup.

Daniel could feel his own emotions surge within him, could feel his own desire for vengeance, for retribution. Not only for the grave sin committed against his host, and the husband of a very special woman to him, but as well for the way O'Neill had been acting in general. He had seen in the months in Ireland when the reports had come in of the Night Fury in Scotland O'Neill's turn for the darker. Even at his most fiery sermons and proclamations before then Daniel had never seen the bishop's hatred of dragons as manifested as it was in those fateful months and weeks leading up to the shipping out. He had been so determined, propelled forward by his desired destiny for his own kind of vengeance.

God it seemed had had other plans.

"It's funny how different people act." Valka spoke up, breaking the silence that had again fallen on the kitchen.

"Yeah, but it's funny how different people can change." Astrid added, managing a wink at Daniel that made him all the more conscious of the heat emanating off of him. Struggling not to grin stupidly and further confound the present situation, Daniel resolved to continue

conversation.

"Yes, some people just adapt to change better than others." He mentally kicked himself the moment the words left his mouth, remembering whose eyes were watching his side. Hiccup was quick to join in the dialogue.

"That may be because some changes are more difficult for some than others may think."

Though he knew he should be gentler on his guest, especially after Astrid's pleas to him, Daniel's statement had come off as arrogant, as if the Celt was already claiming to rule the souls of Berk, and with them the moral high ground. His body pulsed heat, the eyes of Freya burning through him.

Astrid was quick to step in to try and dilute the poison in Hiccup's response.

"But in the end change can be good." She tried to keep her eyes equally diverted between Daniel and Hiccup, finding such a feat impossible and her eyes uncomfortably staring down at her soup, her new brooch of three triangles occupying a space on her peripheral vision, its golden edges burning into her eyes with their radiant glow.

"But even if that change is good, it can still bring a lot of pain."

Hiccup responded, sensing the argument Astrid was inferring. Daniel too could see through the defense, and in a moment he was proud to call one of his better decided to address the issue more directly.

"But in the end, I find the pain has been worth it for the sake of adapting."

Daniel's making the conversation personal interested Hiccup, who pressed on.

"What has this got to do with you?"

Daniel gestured to Toothless near the blaze that was partly responsible for the intense heat he felt permeating his body.

"Before I came here I would have been quite content to join in the bishop's vendetta against dragon kind, and against..._his_ kind in particular. Washing up here, as sad and painful as it was to lose my fellow brothers, has on the whole been a pleasant experience."

Toothless through his own volition had gotten up to stretch, finding the heat in the room even a little much for him to remain so tightly wound up. In doing so he made his way over to the deacon, who was glad to lay a hand on the Night Fury without apprehension or fear.

"I've found my change has been for the better. I never would of thought I could accept something that had for so long been my

greatest nightmare."

He paused to roll his hand over Toothless' head, noting how it seemed even hotter than the room or his own body. He looked directly at Hiccup reimbursed with confidence.

"If it has been God's plan, I should thank him for bringing me here chief Hiccup. This change for me has been one I never expected, but one I have come to embrace."

Daniel's admittance of his own feelings made Hiccup pause in his train of thought as the eyes of Freya continued to burn into his back, yet not as intensely. He had never considered the effect that the island was having on Daniel, only the opposite. Toothless had certainly seemed to have warmed up to the guest, and any dragon he had come in contact with he was told was quite docile in his presence, both in and out of the mountain mint.

"I'm...I'm glad you can let go of the past so well." Hiccup managed, piecing the words together quickly out of a lack of anything else to say. Daniel knew well what Hiccup implied, and decided a brief infusion of dogma into the present situation couldn't hurt.

"It's all about forgiveness. It is what our savior taught us, it is what we live-or at least what we should live by. If I can...if God can forgive all mankind for their own transgressions, who am I not to forgive the actions of dragon-kind?"

He looked about the table, Valka and Astrid expressed an interest in this proclamation, Astrid in particular. She was less concerned now on keeping her interest in the faith secret from Hiccup, but a simple smile was all she could manage for the moment. While this still pleased Daniel greatly, this pleasure receded and a feeling of heat returned as he turned to Hiccup, who had took notice of a particular part of Daniel's statement.

"Your God, he forgives all?"

"Well...this is what Jesus taught us. We are told and so believe that forgiveness is the greatest virtue in man. So as God may forgive us our sins, so we are expected not to hold hate or grudges in our heart against others. With this we strive to be better people, to be more like our Savior."

While Hiccup found this aspect of the faith notable, its implications upset him.

"So you say that you forgive all people of their transgressions."

Daniel could see where his host was going, and though his body throbbed with heat from the room and his own nerves, he responded as delicately as he could.

"Well...no man is perfect. This is key to forgiveness. Many do not forgive, many hold grudges, disdain for others concerning their past actions. Considering that we are only human, this is understandable. It is a truly commendable man who can forgive others, regardless of their transgressions."

Daniel had begun playfully taunting Toothless and the two had begun Toothless' preferred game of wrestling away the hand on his snout. Hiccup couldn't help but smile at the playfulness of his best friend. A best friend who had done a great wrong in Hiccup in the past. A friend that begged for forgiveness.

"So...forgiveness is not guaranteed to anyone?"

"By our fellow man, no. Only when we die and are judged before God can we truly be forgiven."

"And no matter the severity of the crime, they are simply forgiven?" Hiccup inquired, interested to see if he could outwit the deacon.

"Well...not necessarily. In order to be forgiven, one must want to be forgiven. One must understand that what they have done is a sin, and be truly repentant and seek God's grace. Should they not, they do not find peace in the next life, and their soul spends eternity devoid of God's love and grace in the fires of hell."

"Yet even if their crime is of a great severity, should they atone for their transgressions they may be forgiven?"

"Yes, but again one must be of true heart and honest in their conviction to do so. God sees through all lies."

Toothless managed to swat Daniel's hand away successfully, managing a brief chuckle out of the deacon. Hiccup took another spoonful of soup as he absorbed the deacon's words.

Noble? Yes. Appreciated? Less so. Hiccup knew it was time to address the issue the two had danced around behind a shroud of rhetoric.

"Someone like O'Neill, can he...should he be forgiven?"

Despite the heat that seemed to come at him from all directions, Daniel's blood froze as his arm fell away from Toothless, who sat back curious why his new friend had stopped playing.

Luke had confessed the truth to him, he knew as a definite that O'Neill had, for whatever reason Daniel still did not comprehend poisoned the chief. While everyone else in the room had only circumstance and mistrust, Daniel had evidence, an actual witness. Despite his own wish for retribution, he hesitated in admitting his knowledge. His own previously spoken words held his tongue; his sense of morals stymied his desires.

"Well...by man or God?"

"Either."

"Um...well it is taught to us that we should strive to forgive all men, regardless of their actions."

Hiccup's eyes fell back into their sockets at the implication, Astrid and Valka noting the change cautiously. Daniel was quick to expand upon his remark.

"But that does not mean we...necessarily...have to. We can merely let God render his final judgment. "

Intrigued, Hiccup continued, the fire of vengeance burning within him, outdoing the eyes of Freya in its intensity.

"And can we bring about this final judgment sooner?"

Astrid looked to Hiccup with concern; his hatred of the man all silently acknowledged had poisoned him being quite evident in his tone. The tension between her enraged husband and her guest made her nervous; she could feel her body warm in anticipation of conflict if things took a wrong turn. Daniel fell back on his one standby-the bible by his side- to guide his words.

"But of that day and hour knows no man, nor the angels in heaven, only the Father."

Hiccup paused in contemplation of the carefully phrased words.

"What does that mean?"

"God alone decides our fate, whatever happens shall happen, and it is not our place as mortals to know his will."

"And so even if one commits a truly grave sin, it is up only to God to decide their punishment?"

"Well...yes. If we have committed sins of our own, it is not our place to judge other fellow sinners. We are all flawed, only the perfection that is God can truly and impartially judge us. And with his judgment comes forgiveness."

The dogmatic rebuttal halted Hiccup's aggression and made him contemplate his actions. Murder. It upset him to consider himself committing such an action, even if against a man who had attempted such an action on him in the first place.

Toothless made his way over to his master, seeking to play with him now that the deacon had stopped. Hiccup turned to his dragon and began the usual dinner routine of playing with his friend, who had even against his will tried to murder him. A friend he had forgiven.

Astrid could see the dissuasion from violence in Hiccup as quiet again overcame the room. Valka leaned over the table to refill her soup bowl, her lack of conversation warranting her finishing quickly. She wanted retribution as much as Hiccup, but feared for Daniel in that he was arguing himself into a spiritual corner.

Hiccup held off on replying to the deacon, who cautiously got back to his own soup as he watched his host play with the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Forgiveness, a gift he had with difficulty bestowed on Toothless following the ordeal with Drago. Still, Toothless' misdoing was not his own fault; O'Neill's actions were of an egregious honesty in what they had attempted.

Freya burned within him, branding him with distrust and anger and fear and confusion. She called to him, begging him to return to her warm embrace. Begging him to kill in her name, begging him to cast

out this foreigner in her midst. Begging and burning.

"Hiccup?" Astrid asked, seeing her husband becoming despondent, his arm only amusing Toothless out of routine rather than conscious desire. He looked at her, the hidden convert who cared for him now as much as ever. She who had brought this upon him, who had convinced him to show acceptance and mercy and understanding.

And now he was asked to show forgiveness.

He felt hotter and hotter. Freya was burning him, lighting fires he wanted to extinguish. Fire was everywhere.

"Are you alright?" She continued in her inquiry of concern. Daniel and Valka each looked to their respective host and son in concern for his abrupt halt to communication.

Forgiveness. It was out of the question to actually forgive the bishop for his unreasonable misdeeds. He was not in a forgiving mood, all he could feel was warmth and fire, the fires of Freya, burning. Daniel stared at him in nervous curiosity, this man who filled him with a burning desire for vengeance, a trait that he was told to abandon in the name of forgiveness.

Freya burned him. Burned too much. If he was to forgive, he had to change. If he didn't change, he would be left behind, yet receive his vengeance. If he changed, he would have to forgive...in time.

He rose slowly, pulling his occupied arm away from Toothless.

"Chief Hiccup, have I said something to-"

Daniel paused as Hiccup turned around, moving out from his chair and looking to behind him, to the idol of Freya that along with the roaring hearth and scalding soup burned every fiber of his being. He took a few steps to the support beam the idol rested on and removed it carefully off the thick nail it hung from.

"Hiccup?"

Astrid's inquiry went unanswered as Hiccup turned again and walked forwards towards Daniel, stopping at the hearth between the two of them. It was warming, but slowly dying, begging for fuel.

"Daniel?"

"Yes?" Hiccup's eyes remained fixed with Freya's, who longed for him to join her in her warming embrace of retribution and the old ways.

"You truly believe in forgiveness?"

"I uh...well...I do."

Toothless had approached his friend from behind, nudging him in consolation in sensing his distress.

"Astrid?"

"Yes?"

"I forgive you."

The statement caught her off guard; she was unsure what she had done outright to warrant an apology.

"F-For what?"

Hiccup sighed as he turned directly towards the blaze, looking down on Freya as his blood grew warmer and pumped heavily through his body.

"I...I needed...I wanted someone to blame. Someone to blame this change on. I've been short with you, I've been distrustful. You saw goodness in this man before I did. I'm sorry."

She was turning away, he could sense it about her. It had hurt him, and made him burn inside with anger. Yet she was still with him, and made him burn inside with a mutual love and attraction that would never extinguish. She was changing, he didn't want to be any different from her, even if it meant a possible forestalling of his desire for vengeance.

Astrid was as silent as the room save the roar of the blaze. Freya looked at the face of the man who held her. He burned from her gaze, burned from the blaze, burning with anger.

"Daniel, you say it is up only to your God to forgive?"

"Yes..."

Toothless pushed at Hiccup's leg in concern for the anxiety that flowed off his friend. Hiccup sighed, his breath hot like everything else around him. He looked into the blaze, mourning the past, lamenting the present, dreading the future.

God alone decides our fate.

Hiccup looked to Freya one last time, her eyes pleading with him. He closed his own as he lightly tossed the carved wood into the blaze before him. The three at the table sat awestruck at the gesture as Hiccup leaned against the mantle over the hearth, confused yet certain.

"Forgive me."

14. Agape, Philia, Eros

The air was cold and dry, the sun still strong enough to warm the bare skin. Not that this was of particular concern for Snotlout, he had been indoors most of the morning brooding. He had told the bishop to keep his knights with him in the warehouse until the deal could be made well upon, but that had apparently not been a popular idea with the knight who was courting Ruffnut. Or perhaps it was Ruffnut that was courting him? Either scenario angered him, as did Luke's presence in the Great Hall. He was even talking with some of Daniel's followers and seemingly having a good time doing so.

It made no sense to Snotlout for one of those bound to be leaving to be getting so close to people who he would shortly be scarce of, but the Viking bided his time and allowed the conversation to go on. He had his deal established, no need to make things any more complicated than they needed to be.

Not that things weren't complicated enough already. It still frustrated him that he hadn't mounted the bishop's head on a spear. But the thought of the extinguishment of the flames of blasphemy that were engulfing the village was a fair enough offer for mercy to be shed.

The back of his mind where he kept his sense of morality under lock and key continued to pester him. Daniel was under Hiccup's protection, it had been all but admitted by Hiccup's acquiescence to the deacon to soak the villagers in the water. Snotlout still wasn't sure how that made one a Christian, but he preferred not to care. To allow the other Irish to dispose of Daniel was indirectly disobeying Hiccup.

His chief.

It was borderline treasonous, downright disrespectful and perhaps to a convert like Eret sinful. Then again, had Hiccup been so different? He had disobeyed three hundred years of Viking philosophy and in the end his lack of respect had gotten him the girl and the chiefdom. Snotlout could fancy himself the same way, a little act of treason to make the village better. A little disrespect never hurts now and then.

The doors of the hall opened, and the person of Snotlout's holy wrath walked through them. His robe still hung over him in black shade, his long strands of black hair moved in and out of visibility against the ebony backdrop. His book was with him as always. Why it was so important, Snotlout could not say. The followers of the deacon greeted him with excitement, the other Irish knight raised a hand in salutation. Snotlout kept to himself in the back, solitarily watching the deacon becoming immersed in the crowd, which was still bigger than the one yesterday morning.

"Good Morning Daniel, beautiful out there isn't it?"

Luke greeted his friend with a smile.

"I'd almost say it's nice enough to head up the mint fields." Daniel half let on to an intention that O'Gara tried to bring to fruition.

"Well what's stopping us?"

Daniel smiled at the request as he saw it gather a strong reaction from the crowd.

"I would...but we will be expecting an important guest shortly. I wouldn't want to leave and let him wander the island searching for us."

Luke cocked his head at the statement, slightly dismayed at being denied the fair weather outdoors.

* * *

><p>"Who?"<p>

"Are you sure about this?"

Astrid leaned against Hiccup tenderly, knowing the upcoming decision was not an easy one for him.

"Not really, but I certainly can't dig through the hearth ashes for that icon now."

The two stood before the Great Hall, Toothless by Hiccup's side as usual. A dry but light wind was regulating their temperature as they looked up the stairway where they had seen Daniel ascend into the building a few minutes ago.

He wasn't very sure of this, and part of him was regretting casting the sacred wood onto the fire last night. Another part of him wasn't sure it was wise to be seen in such a place with the deacon, and another wasn't sure he would particularly enjoy what he had to say. The deacon's dialogue the previous evening on forgiveness-while noble- still had Hiccup conflicted on the fate he wanted to bestow on O'Neill, and the ideal he found himself wanting to uphold.

"We don't have to if you-"

"No. I know you want to see him. I might as well join you."

Astrid's timid hints at interest in the Christian faith were now accepted between the two, if tentatively. Astrid could feel a coldness from Hiccup that night as the two lay against each other half asleep. Daniel's discussion that night had upset him, she had seen that. It had left her just as at odds with herself.

Daniel had openly defied the bishop that morning, left him without his benign association. The bishop was for all intents and purposes totally friendless on an island of hostile Vikings, including herself.

Yet Daniel still seemed to be defending him. The virtues that he held dear which Astrid was trying to understand and adopt for herself had caused the deacon to indirectly defend the bishop and his heinous actions. She couldn't quite understand it, or how it had affected Hiccup so dearly to cause him to throw the image of Freya into the hearth.

"Well, I suppose we've waited long enough."

Hiccup let out with an exhale, still doubting himself and what he was doing. Astrid knew some encouragement was necessary to raise his spirits. She raised a chin and kissed him lightly on his cheek.

"I want you to know I appreciate this Hiccup. Everything."

Hiccup only looked dead ahead to the hall doors.

"I just don't understand Astrid."

She allowed him to pause and collect his thoughts.

"What happened Astrid? Why did you befriend him before any of us? What did you see in him that I didn't?"

He turned to her, the concern Astrid had seen the previous afternoon following the baptisms was returning to him.

"What did he do to make you...like him?"

Astrid knew, or at least chose to believe Hiccup wasn't implying anything more sinister, and instead of choosing a more aggressive means of answering the question decided only to take his hand and lead him forward.

"I won't speak...just let me show you."

She led him up the steps, allowing him the extra seconds he needed to navigate each tier with his artificial leg. Toothless slowly trudged up the awkward stone terraces to catch his friend in case he fell, an increasingly rare occasion but one still prone to happen. As they reached the handles to the two doors they paused a moment, feeling of the gravity of the occasion.

"Alright...lead the way then."

Hiccup gestured to the doors. Each of the two of them took one and opened it, flooding the hall with the light and fresh air of outdoors as they entered to see Daniel and one of the knights conversing. The sight of the knight immediately gave Hiccup cause for concern before he took a better look at the face. It was the one who had tried to prevent violence yesterday. Daniel seemed to be talking with him without care. If his defiance of the bishop yesterday was any testament to which Irishmen he held loyalty for, this knight appeared to have it. Hiccup buried his apprehensions and continued inward.

The crowd of Daniel's followers had quieted their conversations amongst themselves a moment at seeing their chief enter the hall. Some had given the standard pleasantries, but these too were quieted as Hiccup and Astrid made it apparent that they were intending on sitting with the group. The silence derived from the shock of this impact soon fell apart as a new round of pleasantries were exchanged as the congregation welcomed their chief into their fold.

"Good morning my chief, how are we?" Eret, Son of Eret proclaimed in speaking for the whole assembly.

"Fine thank you."

Hiccup managed with a slight shred of confidence in himself. The open nature of the group and their appreciativeness to his presence relieved his nerves. Daniel was next to address his host, having spoken with Astrid earlier that morning about the event. He was excited by the chief's presence, if only for the sake that he no longer felt he was committing an injustice in secret to his host. Astrid's presence excited him equally, for reasons he was less proud of.

"Chief Hiccup, it is a pleasure to see you here."

"Thank you deacon." Hiccup said, keeping his tone neutral for the moment. The deacon accepted his host's passive response and turned to address his followers.

"Well then, should we get started?"

The crowd murmured in agreement as they took their seats, a semicircle around the center of the hall where Daniel sat upon a circular bench facing them. Luke took a seat near the deacon, also facing outwards towards the crowd in solidarity with his friend as he crossed his arms and kept at attention.

Hiccup and Astrid took seats in the back of the gathering, Toothless keeping close to Hiccup and sitting attentively; too awake to find any rest in dozing off despite how much he disliked protracted human conversation. Hiccup looked behind him to see Snotlout sitting by himself in a contemplative manner. They locked eyes a moment, each coming to terms with the occasion. Hiccup forbade himself from showing any doubt to his cousin, not wanting him to conjure any ideas of intervening in the manner. Snotlout maintained a stoic facade, holding his cup tightly at the sight of his cousin defying the gods in giving spiritual audience to the Irishman. He felt an increasing conviction in his treason, which he considered a gift to his cousin, not a betrayal.

"Well then, where did we leave off last time?" Daniel asked his group, Hiccup leaning back and keeping a tepid eye on the deacon.

"I believe we left off with you telling us about after Jesus had walked upon the waters of a sea."

"Oh yes, thank you Eret, Son of Eret."

Hiccup, bewildered by the strange nature of the story turned to Astrid, who he assumed to have some knowledge of considering her closeness to the deacon. She could only manage an "I've got nothing" response with her arms as the two turned back to face the deacon who had opened his bible and was opening his mouth to speak before being intercepted

"Now what I don't get-Eret, Son of Eret began before Daniel could speak. "...is why Jesus helps this Peter person out of the water when he began to show a lack of faith. Would it not make sense to only have people of true faith follow Jesus? Why does he help the doubtful when there are better people out there?"

Daniel took a moment to gather a coherent response, during which Hiccup kept a keen eye on Eret, Son of Eret. He certainly was showing great signs of piety, far more than Astrid was. If he was any representation of the others in the group of the depth and scope of interest they had in the faith, Hiccup knew Thor would soon be hanging up his hammer.

"You see, Jesus had not come to find the truly righteous amongst us, as no such mortal exists. Peter may have doubted, but still showed such a resolve that Jesus accepted him to be the founder of the church here on Earth. He saw in Peter a man who-though faulty like the rest of us- was willing to place in Jesus a guiding trust that, though life may be as turbulent as the waters in the story, through

following Christ we may navigate such waters and find peace in the next life."

Though Hiccup felt a slight desire to speak up and ask what exactly following Christ meant, he knew he would find out in time, and ascertained the rest of the group was more knowledgeable than he was as he noticed them nod their heads in agreement.

Astrid's head only moved slightly. She was more out of the loop than Hiccup believed, but she would not want that to be known. She felt a compulsion to show solidarity with the congregation, if only for the sake of her husband's acceptance of her slowly changing outlook upon the spiritual world.

"But then how are we to navigate these waters if we are to find ourselves given to sin?" Eret, Son of Eret replied to Daniel, seeking an even deeper response. The deacon looked off to the side to think a moment before further extrapolating.

"It is understandable to think that one must be perfect, that one must act only according to a certain way to live up to Christ's image and if we fall short of this goal we have failed. This is not the case. We shall sin in our lives, this is certain. The important thing to remember is that even when we find ourselves awash and turning to sin, God loves us regardless."

"But if we turn away from God, would this not then make him angry?" A random voice from the crowd questioned.

"While yes it is true that giving oneself to sin and breaking God's laws does distance one's soul from God, God's love is far stronger than that. So long as the soul is repentant, so long as we seek God's grace for what we have done, the soul may be saved. God loves us to such an extent that if he sees repentance within us, we may be with him in the next life."

"Why?"

Hiccup turned his head slightly to Astrid as she posed the simple if vague question. She blushed slightly at recognizing she was being watched, but held firm.

"H-How do you mean?"

Daniel responded, blushing slightly himself as Astrid tickled the reserves of spiritual knowledge the deacon held within himself. Beautiful and willing to learn. He forced himself to break away from the beginnings of fantasy as she elaborated.

"Why does he love us so much if we are imperfect as you keep pointing out?"

She felt a surge of confidence in posing such a question, the interest in the faith she had held since Daniel's first discussion during their first dinner together began to show, evident to both the deacon and Hiccup, the latter of who gracefully accepted the reality before him.

"Well...we are created in His image. We are his chosen creation, that which rules over all others. Even when we fell from Eden, God still

loved us enough establish a covenant with us so that we may still find his peace. We falter, yes. But that does not mean that we cannot strive to live the life that God wants us to live. God accepts that we have free will, and the choice to turn away from him. Yet by accepting God and by followings the teachings of Jesus, we may still prove our worth to Him, and so find his peace."

Daniel took a deep breath at finishing the extrapolation, hoping it would have an effect on his most favorite- and desired- pupil. He was excited to see that perfect combination of confusion and understanding that is evident in the most open minded of students manifested itself on her face as she moved to ask another question.

"But what I mean is...if we are imperfect, why does God not make us perfect, not make the world better?" Astrid leaned back on her bench, holding up a hand to Hiccup's back to rub it lightly as he remained silent, carefully analyzing the conversation at hand. The faith was certainly complex to the fresh mind, though fresh minds were also those most willing to work through complexities.

Daniel delighted in having his spiritual core stimulated, though his mind continued to try and distract him with stimulation of other parts of his body. He focused on that which he had been taught and replied.

"Such an event would then be an imposition on our free will. We would no longer be free thinking people, but we would be slaves to God. This is not the way God wants us to live. He would rather that we sin and turn back towards him of our own volition than to be perfect."

Astrid's expression spoke for the rest of the group in its profession of confusion and misunderstanding. Seeking to keep dominance over the conversation and to keep it from being bogged down in too intricate dogma, Daniel continued.

"Okay...have I spoken of Mary of Magdalene yet?"

"You mentioned the name yesterday but you didn't talk much of her." Eret, Son of Eret replied, having a full mental record of each of the deacon's long extrapolations on the gospel.

"Right. Perhaps I can better explain this as such. You see Astrid..." Daniel smiled at the sense of power the words gave him, the dominance he held over Astrid in spiritual matters was invigorating. It tickled a far darker feeling within him to be more dominating in physical matters, but he repressed these thoughts for the moment as he began to extrapolate.

"At one point during Jesus' wanderings, he came to the house of a prominent person and was invited in to eat with this person. At this same point there was a...prostitute in the town named Mary-not to be confused with Jesus' mother- who had heard of Jesus' arrival. She went to the house and made her way inside. She brought with her a flask of scented ointment and began to wash his feet and anoint them."

Parts of the crowd looked to each other. Hiccup managed half a glance at attentive Astrid, his usual curiosity to foreign customs not with

him. Daniel pressed on.

"It was a custom of the time. Anyways...this prominent person Jesus was eating with was also a member of the priesthood, and he scolded Jesus for allowing a woman of such ill repute near him and to anoint his feet. Jesus then...oh I'll find the page."

Daniel took a moment to flip through his bible to the appropriate page, brimming with anticipation at sharing the story. Astrid turned back to Hiccup, who smiled at her with raised eyebrows to keep a facade of interest for the sake of the moment. While the other villagers seemed ever interested in the deacon's recitations from the text, Hiccup was yet to find anything in Daniel's dictation to convince him of his value. The intense emotional surge he had felt the night before was absent, the confusion and doubt felt in the heat of his house had given way to skepticism in the cool of the hall.

"Ah here we are." Daniel proclaimed as he arched his head back a moment from the text before steadying himself to read.

"Jesus said to this man "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgivenâ€"for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace.""

Daniel took a deep breath to regain his composure as he let the scripture have its intended effect on the congregation. He then turned his attention back to Astrid and continued his elaboration, seeing that his words had left her open to further knowledge.

"That Astrid is God's love. Whereas those who deem themselves to be perfect reject others whom they view as less so, Jesus-and so God-cares instead for those who have sinned but seek forgiveness. This love goes beyond what we may call the superficial acts of the world, and appeals directly to the soul, a soul longing for righteousness and to be redeemed."

Astrid absorbed the words eagerly, striving to feel that sense of fullness she had felt before with Daniel. As the deacon turned to address the group and seek their understanding, Astrid adjusted in her seat and brought her body against Hiccup's side, leaning towards his hear to whisper.

"See, he's not so bad."

Hiccup remained stone faced, and looked ahead as he softly replied.

"He talks so much of forgiveness...might have some kind of understanding with the bishop."

Hiccup was rather surprised to find his arm being punched with more

force than usual, an act which went unnoticed by all given the commonality of the occurrence.

"What?" He turned to Astrid, dismayed to see a scowl on her face.

"Hiccup, come on."

He grumbled to himself quietly as the sting in his arm slowly began to dissipate. He knew his statement was a tad childish considering his monumental actions last night. He was still apprehensive of letting the bishop slip through his fingers all to appeal to the morality of a drifter. Though his outward appearance said differently, he did see goodness in Daniel. What Daniel espoused however, frustrated him. It was passive, patient, and filled by this damned aspiration for understanding. It was filled with concern for the weak, the imperfect, the downtrodden. Attributes Hiccup did not tend to associate with Vikings.

Except himself.

His hardened visage began to crumble amidst the comparison. Memories of his youth, at least before Toothless were indeed quite filled with what Daniel proclaimed. Hiccup had hated these features about himself at the time as he tried ever so desperately to live up to the Viking ideals present around him. He wasn't the dragon slaying warrior he wanted to become. He was too passive. He had instead downed his best friend and through patience and understanding had come to see through the aura of death and chaos that so typified Night Furies, and in doing so had changed himself and his island for the better.

He hated Daniel for pointing this out, and at the same time was grateful. Hatred was hard to show towards a person who reminded him so much of himself. Who conjured images of a young boy trying to change the hearts and minds of Vikings. Who had a difficult time trying to make his case to the chief. Who was trying to convince people to forgive the grievances of the past in the name of friendship and mutual understanding.

Daniel professed love, and all Hiccup could feel was the heavy chest and tight veins of self loathing, mingled with the relieved shoulders of understanding and respect.

His arm was still stinging, his ever present inferiority in weakness was as prevalent to him as always. Seeking comfort, he maneuvered his right leg to brush up against Astrid's, which she took as a sign of apology. He moved his left leg, his imperfect leg closer to his center to keep comfortable.

"Sorry Astrid."

"That's alright." She pecked him a kiss. Regardless of his circumstances, Hiccup knew so long as he had Astrid he was not entirely downtrodden. Some consolation at least.

His attention was drawn back from introspection to the crowd before him who erupted into a holler as one of the villagers tried to make a point made. Toothless' head had begun to sink and his legs slid out from beneath him in boredom. Hiccup noted how spiritual discussion was quick to put the dragon into a daze. If Daniel was to stick

around, he was at least useful for something.

"Look, all I'm saying is that it would make sense if her sins were forgiven for him to take advantage of her services!"

The group looked to Daniel for guidance on the matter. Hiccup inferred they were still on the topic of this Magdalene character as the deacon began to speak with a blushed face.

"No sir...no."

"But-"

"Sit down!" Came from several other members of the audience. Daniel raised his arm to settle the group.

"Easy now. The man is allowed his false thoughts. It is a point I...haven't really had to make till now. Jesus would not have brought the woman to bed. It is not-"

"So he was married?"

"Let the man speak!" Eret, Son of Eret launched back to the random questioner in the group with some aggression. Daniel held out an arm in gesture of calm to his friend before continuing.

"No...He was not married either. His life was not filled with such things."

"Why?" A deep but distinctly feminine voice came from the congregation. Daniel sighed and took a second to compose a better answer than those he had been giving.

"Let me explain it like this. As I was just explaining to Astrid, God's love is deeper and beyond that which we associate with...worldly things. While yes some may associate love with such... matters of..."

Daniel suddenly felt himself stymied by uncertainty. Discussing issues of bodily maturity had been unpleasant enough in the presence of a few knights he had mostly grown up around. Extrapolating on such matters surrounded by foreign people he was still getting to know flustered him. He looked around the room for someone desperately to finish his uncompleted sentence.

"Sex?" Astrid blurted out, hoping to ease the awkward tension in the room. While this was the case for the rest of the congregation, Daniel's face grew notably redder as he stared at Astrid following the exclamation, at a loss for the words he had just silently pleaded for. He was quick to remove his gaze from hers.

"Um...yes...um... anyways yes...um...sex. Not um..." He paused to calm himself and arrange a coherent statement.

"As I mentioned, God's love is stronger than that which some may find in the embrace of others, or even in the company of non...romantic encounters. We...um..."

Astrid couldn't help but cringe at the deacon's awkwardness in speaking of such matters, an expression mirrored by all others

present including Hiccup, who was puzzled as to why the topic seemed to fluster the deacon to such an extent.

"Irish raise weird kids." He whispered to Astrid.

"Yeah."

She replied, almost regretting trying to help Daniel with her seemingly harmless word. Luke, in sensing the frustration his friend was having in explaining the situation, spoke up.

"What my friend is trying to say...- He started to direct the attention of the group his way. -Is that love as we see it in the company of others, whether intimate or not is distinctly different from that which God or Jesus would show to any of us. There is love of earthly things and...Earthly bodies, and then there is the love I would hope you would share for one another. The way you work together, the way you look after yourself and others for the sake of the village, the way you keep and sustain friends, this is another kind of love."

Luke paused to breathe and swallow. Hiccup took advantage of the moment to roll his hand over Astrid's, who remained as interested in this other Irishman as Daniel.

"God's love...-Daniel retook control of the conversation now that the awkward subject matter was mostly taken care of, nodding appreciatively to Luke who bowed his head to the deacon. -Is even stronger than these ties, it is a love of the soul, of the person for who they are and not what they are. That sir is why Jesus would not...appreciate her services."

Daniel gestured with his hand out towards the crowd, who had come to a collective understanding of what the two Irish were speaking of.

"It is this kind of love, this endearing affection which sustains us in our mortal lives and in our relationship with God."

Hiccup lowered his left hand and rubbed Toothless' head as the uninterested reptile lay in a dozing by his side. His understanding of this faith that had so endeared much of his village to a single Irishman was growing, and slowly adopting a positive opinion.

"Weird kids, but decent ones." He admitted in a whisper to Astrid as the deacon moved on to another topic of interest to the crowd. Astrid leaned back against Hiccup, close enough for it to be called a lover's embrace.

"See? Nothing to be afraid of."

"It's not him I worry about."

She turned to him with a grin that dripped with the continued frustration of the topic Hiccup understandably kept bringing up. Poisoning was after all a fairly serious affair.

"Hiccup, I hate it as much if not more than you do, but..." She gestured towards Daniel. "We can figure that out later, just enjoy this."

Hiccup's face which had been firm throughout the morning, had fallen into a relaxed position as Astrid held her head close to him. She could read his inner conflict, and was resolute to let Daniel's dialogue work the same effect on him that it had on her. What that effect was she was unsure of, only that she knew she preferred to have it than not.

"I am."

"Good to know."

She sighed as Daniel went back to speaking, finally able to get along to the new subject for the day. The couple let the words flow over them as both each contemplated their meaning and their implications for their lives, and entertained the occasional quiet fantasy of paying Ireland a visit sometime down the line to exact a belated vengeance.

Four hours passed as the deacon's voice grew hoarse and the crowd grew anxious in their seats. Toothless had settled in for a long nap throughout the duration, but eventually grew tired of being tired, and it was his ascent to the rafters of the hall that was signal for a break to be made.

"I will be in the fields later for those further interested."

Daniel exclaimed to the audience as they dispersed to stretch and get lunch. Hiccup and Astrid who had kept by each other throughout the morning were equally relived to be free, though the spark of interest within Astrid was still burning with a healthy desire to learn. Hiccup had continued to be his analytical self throughout the time listening to the deacon. His skepticism, his doubt, his apprehensions were held in check for the moment, a confidence and assuredness in his actions the previous night was with him. The burning he had felt that evening was also present, but it was more so a calming smolder of peace rather than a ferocious and consuming inferno of rage.

"Well, should we head back home? Think Toothless wants to go flying." Astrid gestured to the high support beams of the hall where the dragon paced back and forth, his feline sense of balance keeping him upright and careless amidst the narrow oak boards.

"Sure, give me a minute."

Astrid stood by and watched a moment as Hiccup moved not towards the doors of the hall but to the bench where Daniel had been sitting, where the deacon was talking quietly with the knight that had stayed by his side throughout the morning, occasionally breaking into the conversation.

"Daniel?" The deacon turned and brought his words with the knight to a rapid close as he addressed the guest he had hoped to have impressed throughout his speech.

"Yes Chief Hiccup?"

"Who is this?" He asked with hazy memory as he gestured to the knight, who bowed slowly in respect to Hiccup as he moved to answer

himself with an extended hand.

"Luke O'Gara."

Hiccup took the knight's hand and shook it as he looked the warrior up and down, trying to better surmise the character of the man. Astrid made her way to Hiccup's side, mutually interested in this other Irishman that Daniel seemed to trust. Hiccup turned to O'Rourke to address the issue.

"One of the bishop's guards aren't you?" He asked, still skeptical of the knight's presence. Daniel was quick to catch on to this and intervened.

"Was...one of the bishop's guards."

Hiccup kept a straight face to Luke as he inquired further.

"What made you change your mind?"

O'Gara hesitated in answering. He did not know if Daniel had told Hiccup the truth, of his own confession of the bishop's guilt. He decided to instead to appeal to other situations avoid a potentially dangerous statement.

"I've spent some time around the...fiercer elements of your island, and I have overall come to appreciate them."

"Oh yeah, you're the one that's been around Ruffnut." Hiccup cut in as a minor patch of red worked its way upon Luke's face.

"Well...uh...not necessarily that although...um...I was referring to the dragons. I've come around to them whereas the bishop is still a bit...reluctant. Ruffnut is...different." He finished with a burst of air that crossed between laughter and a light cough. Content in the answer, Hiccup turned back to Daniel.

"And you trust this man deacon?"

"He's my friend, my best one. I trust him always." Daniel gestured his arm to the knight who bowed his head in appreciation of the kind words. Hiccup, though he knew he'd have to take time to fully gauge the personality of the knight, was distracted as Toothless descended from the rafters and nudged Hiccup's side, increasingly eager to leave the hall and get into the fresh air outside. Hiccup noticed how both Irishmen flinched at the encounter, but only slightly, more so out of surprise at the action rather than entity committing it.

"Alright bud come on. I'll see you later Daniel, Luke."

Hiccup turned towards and made his way to the doors of the hall.

"I'll see you at the house Daniel!"

Astrid's voice was just loud enough to make itself noticeable though not strong enough to go noticed by all. Daniel only quietly waved her off as she turned to join her husband, the leather tassels of her

skirt still swaying like the waves in an ever enticing manner.

"Well...I'd say that went well." Daniel mumbled as the raw leather shifted back and forth alluringly.

"Well mostly well, with the exception of you nearly swallowing your tongue at the beginning." Luke patted his friend on the back in a gesture of camaraderie. It shook Daniel from his thoughts of desire and deeper thoughts of why he had such desires. He scrambled to compose himself and put forward a response.

"Uh...yeah...that was bad. Though you seemed to step on yourself a bit just now."

"A man is allowed to stumble over himself when concerned with matters of actual women. Failing at the mention of one from scriptures, now that's pathetic." Luke smiled on the last word to indicate his playfulness. Daniel could only stare half attentive as Hiccup and Astrid faded from his view on the other side of the hall doors.

"Daniel?"

"Uh?"

"Relax, I'm joking with you."

"Oh..." Daniel was half broken from his fascination with the slender feminine fingers that closed the door behind a person of endless fascination and longing to the deacon. Who had given him the audience he had had before him that morning, who gave him a reason to keep preaching, to keep resolute in the face of aggression "Sorry, was just...thinking."

Luke ignored the O'Rourke's awkward phrasing as a new set of feminine digits caught the door that had been closing. He moved over to greet the woman as Daniel was left with his thoughts of another

"Ruffnut darling!"

* * *

><p>As winter rapidly approached Berk, the precious daylight of the summer seemed to fade away from the horizon quicker with each passing evening, and in turn brought evening closer with each passing day. A month ago, Hiccup would have been at the forge or performing chiefly duties at this time. Instead, he found it better to simply sit by the hearth, nowhere near as strong as it was the night before and relax.<p>

The day had been short, and somehow long. It had certainly been interesting. The long morning of listening to the deacon had left Hiccup in a state of great mental fatigue. This fatigue was at least one only of extensive listening, and not of any particular anguish.

Toothless sat upright in a corner near the door, staring at his master for no particular reason that Hiccup could discern. The dragon was removed from the matters of the village, only caring for the

concerns of his fellow dragons. Hiccup in some way envied his friend in his simple but effective leadership role.

"You tired too bud?"

The dragon tilted his head at the question, as if the fact that he was not curled up near the welcoming blaze was not an obvious enough answer.

"Huh. Figured as much." Hiccup sighed as he poked the fire before him, its crackle the only noticeable noise in the house. Toothless walked towards his friend and warbled; the intricacies of faith and politics playing out in Hiccup's mind were lost on the dragon.

"Yeah bud I'm fine." He let out as he closed his eyes to stretch them. He still wasn't entirely fine, but he found the statement was enough of a lie to keep him together. He leaned back in his chair, eyes still closed as he felt Toothless' snout brush up lightly against his arm. In the relative quiet, Hiccup listened closely to the gentle pooping of the hearth before him.

"You certainly don't seem fine."

Hiccup felt the words reverberate through his mind. He was making them up himself, but found ascribing them the soft and transcendental voice he had heard in his dreams another means to comfort a weary body.

"Okay, mostly fine."

"Which then implies that not absolutely everything is fine."

"...True."

Hiccup's right hand lifted slowly to roll over Toothless' head, catching itself before falling off the slick scales and making its way to the center, where it rested against the strong internal heat of the winged reptile, which looked at Hiccup perplexed as he seemed to have a conversation with himself. Odd, thought the dragon, but then again his master was the epitome of such.

"I'm letting him stay Toothless. I'm going to let him preach."

Hiccup let the words echo off the walls, forcing himself to feel the weight of them. The real dragon in the room stared at his friend, not fully grasping the words and only sensing a feeling of tepid relief flowing from his friend. In Hiccup's mind, the dragon spoke.

"About time you made up your mind."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"You really haven't handled this whole situation well at all."

Hiccup's eyelids tightened as he focused on this inner self that was intent to mock him. Why he insisted on mocking himself, he did not understand.

"How so?"

"Think about it. Astrid accepted him first above all others. She was the embodiment of everything you try to be while all you did was try to be your father. You were stubborn and skeptical, even before you were poisoned. It's taken you a brush with death to come to have any appreciation of this fellow, and even now you doubt yourself."

"Shut up."

"I would but you won't."

Hiccup was growing quickly irritated with himself and his own quick wit and insightful analysis. Intelligence really could be one's worse enemy.

"I was naturally skeptical, everyone was. Even Astrid."

"Yet she beat you too it. She helped him, she went behind your back and subverted you, and she's the reason why this is happening. You mired yourself in doubt and apprehension and indecision whereas she understood what she wanted and accepted it. This is the reason why you've failed."

"I haven't failed anyone!" Hiccup exclaimed into the empty house, the real Toothless pulling back at the sudden noise with perked ears, concerned as his friend kept his eyes closed and a scowl developed upon his face.

"You failed yourself. You failed the gods. You failed your father. It will go down in the history of Berk that Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III abandoned the gods and disgraced the legacy of his father."

"Shut up!"

Hiccup's eyes finally opened in annoyance with his self imposed seclusion. He turned to his side to see Toothless staring at him bewildered. Hiccup leaned over towards the fire, poking it more and squinting as sparks flew up in a brilliant flash of heat. Toothless kept close to his friend, trying to get his attention and understand his anger. Without looking, Hiccup wrapped his arm around the dragon's neck, pulling his head close.

"It doesn't matter what he thinks... or what anyone thinks. I am the chief now." Hiccup again took a moment to let the words reverberate off the walls of his house.

"I... Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III. I am chief of Berk." His grip around Toothless tightened as determination swelled in his voice.

"I...am chief of Berk...and if I...want...Daniel to stay...he will. Regardless of what anyone else thinks."

Toothless shook his head free from Hiccup's grasp as the chief noticed he had constrained it too much. The dragon looked at his master with frustration and a lack of understanding for why his friend was saying obvious things to himself.

"That's good to hear."

"Gah!"

Hiccup jumped at the distinctly feminine and real voice behind him and fell off his chair, striking the ground in an awkward manner as Toothless leaped over to say hello to Astrid.

"As-As-Astrid! Don't sneak up on me like that!" Hiccup exclaimed as he pulled himself up from the floor, Astrid trying to hide a smile at her husband's discomfort which was mildly amusing in its over the top cause.

"When did you get here?"

"I was upstairs taking a nap."

Hiccup's face fell as he mentally admonished himself. He had walked into the house and thought it totally empty just because of the silence. He should have known better.

"Who were you talking to?" She asked with a blushed face, wanting him to admit the answer she already knew.

"Oh you know...just...chatting with Toothless there...right bud?" Hiccup asked pleadingly. The dragon turned his head in confusion, making the reality of Hiccup's situation all the more obvious. Astrid approached him with soft footsteps as he found himself incapable of finding any other words to try and explain away his previous actions. Astrid embraced him, the warmth of her love melting away most of Hiccup's embarrassment.

"I'm proud of you, chief."

Hiccup exhaled slowly and intently as he felt his wife close to him. He wanted to say something, but found the steady stream of words he had kept up with himself a moment ago was no longer with him.

"And I'm sure he is too."

She whispered close to his ear. Still lost for something to say, Hiccup held her tight. This woman who had brought this change upon him, whom he still loved dearly regardless.

"You think so?"

"Your family seems to have a history of adopting foreign things, I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

Astrid pulled back to stare Hiccup in his eyes that remained strong despite the circumstances.

"What do you say we head out for a flight? Just a quick circle of the island before it gets dark out." She requested, knowing it would be just the thing to shake Hiccup from his funk and to reawaken her own body following the afternoon slumber.

"Sure. I need to clear my head."

"Oh I'd say you've been doing plenty of that already." She jested as she cut herself from the embrace to get ready, leaving Hiccup with a blushed face. Toothless strode next to him, looking to him pleadingly at hearing the word "flight".

"At least I'll get you out of my head."

Toothless turned his head in confusion at the seemingly negative connotation, but was quick to forget such things as Hiccup made his way towards the door, indicating that flying was indeed ahead.

* * *

><p>The company of many had fallen away to the company of one for Daniel as Luke kept to his side throughout the day and now sat beside him on the steps of the great hall. The congregation had dispersed as the day grew long and Daniel's voice grew hoarser. Darkness approached rapidly, and Daniel decided it best to enjoy the dry weather and illuminating orange sunset while unoccupied.<p>

"It really is a beautiful island." Luke proclaimed quietly, more so desiring to admit it to himself than to make it known to his friend.

"Yeah."

Daniel replied with the same lack of interest. A flock of Nadders swooped low over the village before soaring back up towards the colorful sky. Neither Irishman flinched, increasingly comfortable with the presence of what had up until two weeks ago been the manifestation of their collective fears and nightmares.

"You're really staying here?" Luke asked the deacon, knowing the answer, but desiring conversation.

"Yes. I love it here Luke. The people, the land itself, dare I say even the dragons."

"They are an interesting assortment." Luke responded, not caring whether or not he was referring to the people or the dragons. Daniel nodded in agreement.

"Aye, that they are. But they are equally interested in the Word, and for that reason I must stay."

Luke could hear a confidence in the deacon he had rarely known when they were back in Ireland. A conviction in vocation and self purpose that usually typified the personas of other knights Luke knew, not mild mannered men like Daniel.

"As noble a cause as any."

"Indeed it is."

O'Gara agreed. He felt guilt building in the back of his throat. It had been his idea in the first place to convert the island, his words that had prompted the bishop to his insane behavior. Daniel hadn't even needed to hear his proposal, and had set about bringing the island into the fold of God by himself. It was a respectable undertaking, and certainly one removed from the eccentricities of the

bishop's plan.

"I...I might stay too."

Luke professed without care. Daniel turned to him in surprise.

"What?"

"I can't go back either. Not back to the constant threat of attack, the war, the violence, the hatred. We've found something special here Daniel. I'm not throwing away the opportunity to be here out of a fear of retribution."

Daniel inhaled deeply as the topic was broached.

"I have the chief's protection Luke, I'm sure I could have it extended to you as well. There's no reason for you to suffer for the bishop's actions."

"It's not that I'm concerned about. If anything I have a feeling O'Neill and the others are going to be getting away..."

Daniel's head sunk as he realized O'Gara's concern, and that his professions to the chief may have something to do with the lack of justice being carried out. Luke appeared equally distraught.

"It's...I just feel this is my entire fault. If I hadn't said anything in the first place O'Neill wouldn't have tried anything. The chief wouldn't be poisoned; you wouldn't in turn be hated by so many of these people. If I hadn't said anything, he wouldn't have tried anything. We could have just let you do what you do best, and maybe this would have all turned out for the better."

Daniel allowed silence to reign a moment before responding.

"Luke, whatever you've done...is in the past now. Stay here, and the two of us can move on to a better future. We can become part of this island, this great experiment. We can leave the past behind, build something better here for both God and man."

Luke was appreciative of the deacon's words in their disarming wisdom. As he gathered words to respond both Celt's attention were drawn to the chief's house in the distance where Hiccup, Astrid and the Night Fury exited with saddles ready.

"Thank you Daniel."

The deacon remained quiet, fixed on an object well beyond his grasp.

"I suppose it will be a brighter future."

Daniel remained quiet and distracted as Astrid called Stormfly out of her stable. Luke tried to see what transfixed O'Rourke so much, but couldn't see anything that he could think would distract the deacon.

"Right Daniel?"

"Uh...oh uh...yes, right."

"You seem distracted today, something the matter?"

Daniel knew his distraction was more pronounced than he intended, and tried to cover himself.

"Oh...no. Nothing. Just..."

Daniel's line of barely conscious thought was broken as Astrid screamed in the distance, amused as Hiccup had swept her off her feet, insisting on personally fitting Astrid to her dragon as the two spun, albeit awkwardly given Hiccup's leg. Her hair, even when tied back spun in an alluring way as the two rotated a moment before Hiccup marched her the few feet necessary to Stormfly, who sat patiently annoyed at the delay in flying with her master.

"Just what?" Luke inquired; looking into the distance some more to see what was holding his friend's attention. Daniel could only sigh as his mind struggled to tow the line between his present circumstances and a hundred different fantasies. Luke looked some more where Daniel did, seeing only the chief and his wife mounting their-

"Oh Holy Peter's Ghost."

The mild declaration was enough to temporarily garner Daniel's hesitant attention.

"What."

"You've got it on for the chief's wife don't you?"

Whatever color existed in Daniel's pale face rapidly drained before coming back in force, the deacon trying to hide his face amidst the drapes of his black hair as he tried to move desperately away from the subject.

"Wh-w-what?"

"Oh Lord above you do!" Luke cracked a smile at the humor he saw in the situation, Daniel found himself feeling only shame and the cold reality of a shattered facade.

"Is it...is it really that obvious?" He asked slowly, not daring to look his friend in the eye.

"I don't know how I didn't pick up on it sooner! Oh my-it makes sense now! Daniel!" He exclaimed half amused by the prospect of his hopefully celibate friend developing a crush, all the while slowly coming to grips with the severity of the situation. Daniel cupped his face with his hands in despondency, breathing heavily.

"I-I-I can't stop thinking about her Luke. Every-every time I close my eyes and half the time I open them she's there. I just...I-I can hardly control myself around her."

The severe personal impact the revelation of Daniel's secret had upon his soul began to become apparent to O'Gara as the deacon kept his

gaze away from anything that could look back at him.

"Daniel...you realize the severity of-"

"Of course I do!" Daniel turned to Luke with aggression wrought upon his face, raw emotion emanating off of him in confused torrents of dread, shame and lust.

"Of course I know it's wrong! Of course I know I shouldn't and that I should try and keep a grip on myself and I should be above this but..." Daniel trailed off, his tirade stymied by lack of words before it could even properly begin.

"It's something so different. It's like...I can't explain it it's just..."

"Daniel..." Luke cut in, now fully aware of the true inner pain the issue was causing his friend. "Look, I'm not going to lecture you, I know you already know what you're doing. But for the love of God lad just control yourself. If we want to leave the past behind we also have to leave the present where it is."

Daniel remained quiet but consoled if only through the virtue of having his best friend's support.

"I-I'm trying."

"No. You will. I have faith in you Daniel, near as much as I have in the Lord above. Stay strong and don't blow this for us."

Luke patted Daniel on his back with a smile.

"After all, I've got my own girl to think about!"

Daniel couldn't help but smile at Luke's bravado, though this smile quickly turned into a look of fear as a strong wind blasted both Celts. They turned to find Hiccup and Astrid on their dragons, having made a quick dive down from their house to greet the two.

"Evening you two." Astrid greeted the pair with a smile that was enough to raise Daniel's spirits among other things. Luke allowed his friend to be lost in himself as he took the lead in the conversation.

"Good evening chief Hiccup, Lady Astrid." Luke bowed in accordance with the pleasantries he was raised with, comfortable in the chief's presence if only by virtue that he hadn't yet been killed by him.

"We're heading out for a quick flight, care to join us?"

Both Irishmen's faces quickly snapped to a state of alertness at the proposal, one Hiccup was not entirely thrilled about but allowed for the sake of making amends. Though intimidated still when in the proximity of the Night Fury, Luke managed to stutter something that one might consider a response.

"Uh...uh...I mean... actually...ride the...ride the..."

"Yes." Hiccup stopped the knight, knowing Toothless was growing

irritated at the delay. The two Celts turned to one another, neither quite sure how to take the offer.

"Come on Deacon, if you're going to be staying you should have more experiences on the backs of dragons asides from me nearly killing you."

Luke squinted his eyes at O'Rourke at the mention of the unfortunate anecdote, who finally mustered his fortitude to respond upon recalling the rather unpleasant memory.

"Well, I suppose that's as convincing a reason as any. Why not?"

Luke turned back towards the chief, his determination bolstered by the leadership of his friend.

"Sure."

"Good, you'll ride with me, Daniel can fly with Astrid." Luke tried to quickly get his friend out of what he knew would only be an uncomfortable situation for him. Hiccup moved to speak again before he could actually manage any protest.

"Everybody should have their first flight on a Night Fury, and Daniel already had his turn. It's only fair for you."

The two Celts, though not speaking came to a mutual understanding that any protest would only arose suspicion. Luke neared the Night Fury with some caution, keeping an eye on Daniel as he accepted his fate of close proximity to his private sin. O'Gara brushed Toothless' scales with his hand first, the distinctive look of amazement coming to his face as it did for most all who performed the feat for the first time. He got behind the chief and hoisted himself into the back of the saddle, a somewhat uncomfortable position though not unbearable.

Daniel, trying to exude some kind of confidence but failing at every turn approached Astrid. Stormfly kept idle but anxious, wishing the man in black would just hurry up.

"Come on Daniel." She extended her hand, which despite his thoughts about what that hand could do to him he took and held firmly too as she pulled his light frame onto the dragon's back. Though the room on the saddle was limited, he found it a tolerable position.

"Hang on!"

The dragon quickly bounded into the sky after Toothless. Daniel found there to be no other option but to hold tightly to Astrid's ribs and clinging close to her body, her hair waving across his face, thick with the smell of honey perfume.

As the dragons steadied out, Daniel was able to relax at least somewhat and enjoy the feeling of wind pressing against his body, his own body pressed against Astrid's. God had painted the sky a brilliant pastel to precede the evening which Daniel eagerly enjoyed, though he started to keep his distance from Astrid as his eagerness became increasingly pronounced.

Everything about her fascinated him. Everything about her called him closer to her, to the embrace he could give her as they flew above the ground that Daniel was intending to call home. Above the ground where he would have to spend every moment of the rest of his life near this valkyrie, a tantalizing object that was the whole reason for his staying forever out of his reach. Now she was within his reach, for this brief moment. He savored every part of it, the feel of the wind, her aroma, the colors surrounding him. All were to be but memories. Memories he passionately desired to make a present reality.

"I'm glad I'm staying Astrid."

He managed in a half convincing tone as they glided into a turn.

"Me to."

She replied back to him, keeping her head forward and fixed on her husband, who was having a surprisingly easy time in adapting Luke to being above the ground. He knew she would only know Hiccup, and if he stayed, that would be his life.

A part of him that made itself very well known when in Astrid's presence disagreed with this resolution.

* * *

><p>Astrid held a particular enjoyment for nights like this. When the clouds were gone, the air was cool and dry, the moon shining in all its unimpeded brilliance. She had many fond memories of being with Hiccup on nights like this, both before and now that they were married. Just walking with him in these ideal conditions, enjoying his company and the beauty of the subtly illuminated darkness.<p>

Hiccup was not with her now. Though he had retired for the evening an hour ago, Astrid found herself unable to join him. The night was growing late and she still felt no exhaustion. If anything she felt antsy, tense. It was not so much any nervousness, but just an inability to be still, a kind of minor wanderlust that compelled her to be out in the night, roaming aimlessly. She would join her husband later, for now she could only walk, holding her furs tight against herself as the wind tickled the border between pleasant coolness and biting cold.

She felt a sense of relief now that the day had closed. Daniel's lecture that morning had been as pleasing as she had anticipated as he seamlessly made his way from topic to topic, covering a multitude of stories involving the Jesus man and those who had come before and after him. Asides from his first story about the Mary Magdalene character, which had seemed to fluster him for some reason he spoke with great confidence and enthusiasm about the topics, as if he had looked at them from every possible angle and found the best way to explain each of them.

Hiccup was finally accepting him as well, and it seemed most of the village was starting to come to grips with the first ones pious enough to follow Daniel. His walking through the blaze had certainly been a boon to that cause. She would have to remember at some point down the line to thank Snotlout for that event, once the current

situation blew over.

Now that the safety of Daniel was assured, her thoughts were becoming increasingly drawn towards the other Irishmen. While her encounter with the knight that Daniel seemed to trust left her confident in that particular warrior's honor and character, there still hung in the air the undeniable fact that her husband had been poisoned by another one of the Irishmen. While the fact that they were leaving soon was comforting, the fact that their bodies were still capable of leaving was distressing. She found herself plotting different times where she could get away for a few days and hunt them down in that mysterious island of Eire and make them pay for this.

She still couldn't quite grasp why the bishop would want to try and kill Hiccup. It wasn't a logical decision, at least by any form of logic she knew of. Who knew, perhaps this was standard custom in Ireland to try and kill your host. There were probably stranger ways of doing diplomacy.

She was determined that she would have her vengeance, in due time. Even if it was rather conflicting with what Daniel espoused and what she was gradually adopting. Granted during the day she had found herself cursing her old gods and using their names casually in conversation, but a presence in the back of her mind had reminded her every time of the one God she was coming to accept, and the broach that she still wore, finding it quite effective at keeping her furs close to her body.

She had already circled the village twice, and still she was awake, her legs demanding she continue to wander despite how much the same legs wanted to be near Hiccup's, or at least the one. She had noticed Daniel was still missing from his bed downstairs when she had left the house. She hoped he still wasn't in the fields, knowing him he would probably spend the entire night in them and wake up half frozen.

"Eh, at least a good walk up there should tire me out."

* * *

><p>Part of Daniel wanted to move, to go back to the house and the bed he had there and find shelter beneath its covers. Another part kept him here in the mountain mint, absorbing its sweet smell and making him endure the encroaching cold. While the high grass kept much of him out of the wind, the cool ground slowly sucked the heat away from his body. Still, he refused to move, refused to go back to the house where his obsession slept above him.<p>

He knew he would be able to control himself, hopefully. He had done well so far, mostly. Still, the cold was enough to hold his desires back, mostly. Even this self punishment was not enough to stymie his desires, no matter how much he hated them. His life on this island, it would be difficult. Still, he would persevere, he hoped.

The flight with Astrid, beneath the early stars of the night that punctured through the canopy of pastel clouds that draped the sky played over and over again to sooth the wishes of his subconscious. Even despite the great satisfaction he had in the encounter, it wasn't proving to be enough. It kept digressing into an alternate ending where the two of them landed atop the mountain and joined

amidst the snow which would do no harm to their mutually hot skin.

"The greatest blessing God gave the mind, the greatest curse the devil gave the body."

Daniel found himself whispering the advice of O'Gara to himself in an effort to control himself. It was a vain effort to make himself confront what he believed to be the evil of his ways, but even an effort in vain can at least be called an effort made.

"Oh."

He exhaled into the air, letting the gossamer wisps of his breath vanish into the darkness, fading trails bidding farewell on the beams of moonlight.

"Why do you maroon me here to teach and yet tempt me so?"

His quiet appeal to his constant protector went answered per the usual routine of faith. He was left still alone with himself and the images of Astrid that danced in his head.

"Daniel?"

"Oh come on..." He complained half to himself and half to the divine as he sat up, his shadow against Luna's illumination enough to give away his position.

"Don't tell me you fell asleep out here." Astrid jested as she continued to approach the black shadow with a pale face and piercing blue eyes.

"No, just...laying here...enjoying the stars." He really hadn't been paying much attention to the heaven's above, much too concerned with earthly matters for that.

"What are you doing here?" He asked, trying not to be too direct and drive her away, although he disliked how she drew close and moved to right at his side.

"Couldn't sleep, been out walking and figured I'd come and make sure you weren't going to spend the night out here...which it appears you were intent on doing."

The most perfectly placed torrent of lunar light caught Astrid's face she brought herself within a few inches of Daniel as she smiled at the statement, amused at the strange ways of this Celt. With his black hair and the cover of the night, Daniel smiled back with a confidence he loathed having.

"Well...it's not so bad. I spent many a night in worse conditions on the road back in Ireland, especially in the mountains. I'm used to it."

"You'll fit right in then."

"I'm sure I will."

Her reminder of the fact that he would be spending the rest of his

life on Berk left him conflicted. Two weeks in her presence was torment enough, life would certainly be as close to Hell as he could see himself approaching unless he actually gave into himself, in which case he was convinced he would go directly there.

"I know you will. Most people seem to love you Daniel. There are some that may take a little longer, but I'm sure in time they'll see who you really are too."

The compliment brought a smirk to his face, which the turning of the moon was beginning to illuminate.

"Thank you...it's...it's good to be loved."

"Yes it is."

She carelessly threw to the breeze, wondering if Hiccup would be missing her in their bed. The two sat quietly by each other for a moment, neither sure what to say to carry on the conversation. With Astrid quiet, O'Rourke decided to keep the talk moving, hoping it would go in a different direction. His choice of words prohibited this.

"At first I thought...to be honest none of us would be very welcome here. We had heard stories about...others who had tried. Tried to convert Vikings...it...didn't end well for them."

Daniel trailed off, knowing it wasn't the most light hearted of topics to bring up. Astrid, though dismayed at the thought of other men like Daniel being killed by people of her fellow blood knew stalling would only lead to further awkwardness.

"Well...you don't need to worry about that. You are loved here Daniel."

Astrid said it so quickly she barely took the time to register it on her tongue. Yet the words that a few days ago had brought her nothing but consternation and confusion seemed easier this time around, as if she was comfortable with the fact. Comfortable with the fact, comfortable with her emotions, even if Daniel couldn't be any less so with his.

"Well um...thank you."

"You're welcome." Astrid replied as Daniel debated how to continue. Honesty prevailed for better and worse.

"No I...I...I mean it Astrid. Thank you, for everything."

He paused a moment to collect his words. Astrid kept a half interrogating if innocent eye on him, interested in how he was going to be elaborating.

"If it...if it weren't for you Astrid I...I don't think I could have done what I've done. You were the first one, the first one to give me a chance, to listen."

Daniel paused again, leaving Astrid with the magnitude of his words. It was true, and even as much she had thought about the same fact, to have the person she had so deeply affected admit this was humbling.

Even if it had initially been against what she had intended, she had been the one to first be impressed with his words and his book, and had led the women who had become the first truly devoted to him. She couldn't deny her central role in all of this, in letting one man totally uproot her faith that went back hundreds of years as well as that of the rest of her village. Not a bad accomplishment considering she had originally viewed him and the rest of his ship survivors with the same skepticism and mistrust as everybody else.

"I...owe everything here to you... and God of course."

Astrid smirked in appreciation of the compliment and of Daniel's caveat, reminding both himself and her of their presence before God. As Daniel fell quiet, Astrid decided to reciprocate some kind words for the deacon.

"Well...thank you Daniel." She was caught without a means to continue, and O'Rourke continued in his reluctant gushing of sentiments, though turning to inquisition.

"What I just don't understand is...why me? Why did you protect me?"

The similarity to Hiccup's own question momentarily flustered Astrid, but the serenity of the situation allowed her clear her thoughts and give a reasonable answer.

"I...I guess I just...Since I first saw you at the dinner the first night I knew you were different. I saw you were a peaceful man, an honest man. I saw you, and I wanted to understand you, to know why you were the way you were. And then you started speaking of your God, and you read me the Psalm and I..."

Astrid paused a moment, knowing she was rambling like Hiccup in the early years of their relationship.

"I wanted what you had. I wanted some greater connection with something bigger than myself. I wasn't afraid to listen. I...I guess I wanted to be like you."

The confession left Astrid relieved, her honesty with herself and to Daniel was satisfying to her soul. Daniel, who had listened with patience and great self restraint found himself more humbled than usual.

He really had changed this woman before him. This was a living and breathing testament to his success and piety. Her statement had led only to silence again between the two, the gravity of the declarations but the mutual understanding both had between each other kept the air about them oddly neutral.

Such a position left Daniel nervous. The honesty between the two, while respectable had left both in a state of uneasiness, unsure how to proceed. Despite inhibitions and perfectly rational arguments against the action, Daniel reached beneath his collar.

"Astrid I...here."

He pulled over his hair and held before her his cross, its illustrious silver glistening in the moonlight.

"I...I want you to have it."

"Daniel-"

"As a token of my appreciation...for everything."

He held the necklace out before her, Astrid's expression aghast at the sudden and brazen gesture.

"Daniel...this is yours. Don't you need-"

"I can have another made. I...I want you to have mine. Please."

Astrid was struck by the deacon's offer. To her, it spoke volumes of his character and true piety, of his willingness to part with something so supposedly close to him as a means of expressing gratitude.

To Daniel, this entire situation was reckless and getting out of control, but his passion and determination was overpowering any sense of reason he had. She was sitting still, nervousness began to spread within him as to how her mind was reacting, prompting him to further action he knew he shouldn't be acting upon.

"M-may I?"

He held the necklace between both his hands and widened the gap of the string and with slightly trembling hands concealed by the darkness brought the piece to her head. He lowered it over her hair as she assisted the string over her thick braided hair.

"Daniel, thank you." Her voice was soft, filled with appreciation and wonder as the silver cross lay over her chest, still warm from Daniel's own body heat. His hands stalled over her shoulders as the string rested across her neck.

Daniel's mind was awash with a thousand differing ideas, condemnations and scenarios in the course of a few seconds. He tried to pull his hands away, finding his arms heavy and slow to react to the cries of his rational soul to remove themselves from such close proximity to her. As he started to pull up, his left hand with the slightest of motions brushed the back of her jaw.

His hand paused at the touch, stalling upon the soft and fair skin that the moon embellished with a shining gray tinge. Astrid's smile at Daniel's previous gesture started to fall for every second he held his hand, unsure why his hand was paused idly at the back of her face. Then, she felt a surge of muscular power embolden the fingers at her jaw as they pulled her towards him.

"Dan-"

Her request was cut short as a pair of Irish lips clumsily collided with her own. The kiss was short, but elicited a torrent of frustrated desire and poorly understood feelings. Daniel broke away from her lips shortly after they met, eyes pleading, breathing scattered and mouth trembling with a smile that was unsure why it existed.

"I...I...I love you Astrid. I-"

Daniel's proclamation was cut off as a fist collided against the side of his face, sending him reeling into the grass.

"Bastard!"

The accusation ended the tranquil quiet of the night as Astrid stood up over Daniel's body, dejected and limp in the grass, arm and hair covering his face.

"Ow."

Astrid could feel the blood rushing to her face, her expression flush with shock and anger at the bold display against her person.

"How dare you!" She kicked Daniel's side in anger, her mind dismissing the sincerity and innocence of his person just a moment before as her thoughts switched between fury, betrayal, and mistrust. Beyond the reach of reasoning and giving into her more violent tendencies, she allowed a torrent of accusations and a full soliloquy of her rage to be heard.

"Is this what this has all been about!? You try and be a holy man and act pitiful and weak and scared to earn my sympathy so you can get with me!"

She kicked him again, a spike in the wave of broken trust she poured down upon him.

"Speaking soft and pretty words and putting on an act of being some good man just so you could earn my trust and the chance I'd actually be with you? I love Hiccup! Was that not clear enough when I cried over his limp body poisoned by your God-Gods damned friends!"

She pulled the cross back from over her head and curled it in her palm as she crumpled the string in a fist.

"You're a sweet talker, that's all you are. All you and all the stories you tell about love and forgiveness and everything you say is just words. Stupid words I should have never listened to!"

She threw the cross at his silhouette of a black body as she stormed down the hill in a flurry of emotions.

"Bastard."

How could he dare do that to her? The audacity, the brazenness, the nerve. It made sense to her now. All his talks, his awkward and nervous manner around her, it all came together in one unsettling conclusion. How could she have been so blind to it? She had let her sympathy for him overwhelm her normal perceptiveness. She should have seen this coming.

"Idiot." She whispered to herself as her anger turned inward and on her own lack of proper perception. She couldn't wait to tell Hiccup about this, to free him from his chain of exacting vengeance. She could have it to, on all the Irish including this one she had actually considered a friend. The thought brought a malevolent smirk

to her face at the idea of sweet retribution. She began to plot how she would do it for a moment before her thoughts were broken.

On the wind, carried to her ears by a suddenly strong gust of wind, as if destined to reach her understanding came a high pitched noise from behind her.

Daniel was sobbing.

"Pitiful." She intended to only pass the act off and continue walking. Yet she was stopped as the squeals grew more pronounced. She hadn't hit him that hard... had she? No, he must just be even softer than she had thought.

Such a determination should have been enough to allow her to keep moving, to pass off his weakness and continue out of the field plotting her sweet revenge. Still, she found herself unwilling to move forward, the fury within her subsiding for the moment as the sad oscillations of Daniel's misery carried into the night sky. She sighed deeply as her throat felt itself suddenly dry and filled with poorly understood emotions.

"Damnit."

Astrid turned, bewildered with herself for still taking pity on him and slowly trudged her way back up the slope of the field towards the dark mass that lay in distress amidst the grass. She was still surging with anger, but this became diluted with emotions she did not want to confront as her nearing proximity made Daniel's sobs all the more audible, his body convulsing with each one.

She stood over the deacon, this pathetic wretch of a man as she considered him, laying on his side face buried in his arms and body shaking with a miserable soul, unconcerned with the actual physical pain Astrid had inflicted upon him.

"What?" She asked derisively, her fury at his actions preventing her from seeing the true severity of the inner turmoil of the man before her. Daniel continued to quietly weep to himself, each contorted and high pitched breath he let out washing away Astrid's animosity, her face falling into a regretful if contemptuous pity.

"Come on, I didn't hit you that hard." The callous remark was all Astrid could allow herself to say, not wanting to appear too understanding to this man who had just insulted her with affection.

Daniel's breathing slowly steadied after a minute, Astrid begging her legs to let her move away from him, but finding her friendship with the deacon just strong enough to force her to at least try and hear him out. He rose slowly, righting himself in a seated position as his hands, falling to his side revealed beneath the curtains of his hair a face exhibiting all the signs of a man truly at odds with himself.

"I- I'm sorry Astrid. P-Please forgive me. It's-this was a horrible mistake I..." Daniel found his weary mind at a loss for words in trying to explain his actions to a woman he couldn't see himself being an enemy of. This woman, finally seeing just how much Daniel's actions had affected himself sat back down, hoping despite her

vestiges of anger to see where O'Rourke's apology was going.

"It's just...Ever since I saw you I've had...longings. I never set out to make you my own it's just...You were the first one to pay any attention to me and who showed any interest in me and despite how much I tried to control myself you were always there and interested and I couldn't stop teaching you and..."

Daniel trailed off as his rambling gave way to concerned breathing and a realization that he was babbling in an almost incoherent fashion. He finally managed to look at Astrid, who though still skeptical was intent on fully hearing the pleas of the deacon.

"I...I don't want to hurt you Astrid, or to take advantage of you. I don't want to lose you in my life I just...lost control of myself a moment. I don't want to have these desires but...you're just so beautiful and kind and perfect in every way and you allowed me to preach and you were willing to accept me and...and...and I love you for that Astrid.

Daniel fell quiet a moment, noting how Astrid was yet to punch him again after his second confession. He continued as she sat quietly, a stoic visage betraying her surprise at the burst of raw emotion.

"It's beyond physical. I...love who you are Astrid. I love everything you've done for me, and everything we have between us. It's just...just."

"Daniel." Astrid interjected, summoning his absolute attention immediately as she began to speak. She steadied her words, knowing to tow the line between her receding rage and renewed sympathy for the man in front of her delicately. She reached out with a hand and took his own in a gesture of understanding as she began.

"Thank you. I...maybe might have over reacted there."

"No I don't blame you. I-shouldn't have done that."

"No. No you shouldn't have." She made clear with a smile that she was being clever, which was enough to at least somewhat calm Daniel's racing nerves.

"But Daniel...if you really feel this way about me...I just want you to know I appreciate the fact that you're being honest. Okay?"

Daniel, relieved that Astrid was at least somewhat settled in temperament managed to crack a smile at the request, before this gesture of calm faded into a grimace of conflict.

"I-I don't want this to be what you know me for Astrid. This is not who I am or who I want to be. It's just-"

"Daniel." Astrid stopped him from embarking on another diatribe of his guilt, having heard enough. While there was still some stinging anger within her, she had come to see the cry for forgiveness pouring out of the deacon before her.

"It's-it's okay to have these feelings. But you understand that I could never love you that way?"

"Of course."

"Good." Astrid reached into the grass and found glistening against the green of the mint the cross she had thrown at him in her fury a moment ago. She pulled it by the string into her fingers, Daniel watching her uncertain of her next action.

"Daniel, I love you too. As a friend. For everything you have tried to give me, for everything you have done for me and the village. For trying to be the man you want to be, and not the one I just saw. Okay?"

Daniel's head hung low, his body defeated and his soul rejuvenated by Astrid's dictation.

"Yes."

The one word brought a quiet of the same serene nature the two had been enjoying a few minutes ago. Astrid could see the confliction and defeat that Daniel's wilder side had suffered, and the relief and joy his more acceptably rational side was feeling. She placed the cross back over her neck in a motion of understanding which brought another smile out of the deacon.

"After all, a special someone has taught me something about forgiveness."

Daniel kept his gaze fixed with Astrid's, renewed with confidence and a sense of understanding being emerging between the two.

"Thank you Astrid."

Daniel's eyes hung low as silence pervaded the space between the two again. Sensing both it was her time to leave the deacon to his thoughts and finally enjoying the feeling of exhaustion, Astrid got to her knees, Daniel looking to her with a melancholic relief at her readiness to depart.

"You coming?"

Despite that he had found acceptance with his obsession, O'Rourke could not find it within him to follow her back to the house, a deeper sense of guilt and conflict within him demanding a rough night out in the field as compensation to a higher power for his actions.

"Uh...no. I should probably stay. It's...for the better."

Astrid, understanding the ways of the deacon and his devotion to self suffering stalled a moment. Hesitantly, unsure of herself but determined in the justness of her action, leaned in and gave the deacon a kiss, chaste and disciplined but brimming with sympathy on the top of his head. His face hung low, quietly appreciating the gesture if regretful that it would be all he would know.

"That's...a token of my appreciation."

She rose and stood over him a moment, before turning with a calm expression to finally make her way to her house.

"Good night Daniel."

"Good night Astrid."

The deacon laid back into the grass, his mind exhausted and his body cool. He curled up around the embrace of the field, the wind passing overhead. The soft crooning of the swirling grass served as his melody to sleep by, his mind slowing from racing images of the woman who had just been before him to a quiet and contemplative recitation of psalms, finding the practice finally working its usual effect of calming his soul.

Astrid made a good pace out of the field and towards her house as thin clouds started to obstruct the moon's brilliant light. Her mind began to reorganize the night into a rational order of events as she neared her house, the sleeping specter of Toothless on the roof greeted her as she entered the warm building, making her way upstairs and quickly into bed with a passed out Hiccup.

Her actions, thought some may see them as rash, she knew in her heart to be of the love she understood, one greater than herself or any around her. She looked out the window, where in the fields she knew Daniel would be cold tonight. Better that she decided, than hurt.

15. Apocalypse

Luke had learned through his years that being awoken at a time that cannot be truly be described as late night or early morning was never a good omen. Unfortunately, being woken at such an hour often left one oblivious to this fact. When Matthew had rather forcefully woken him from his slumber in the great hall, O'Gara had only made half hearted inquiries as to what the situation was, and allowed his sleepy body to be dragged out into the cool night which slowly stimulated his senses.

"What's the situation?"

Matthew remained silent as he led O'Gara by the arm quickly through the village. Luke could see the faintest glimmers of silver light rising from beyond the ocean. At least morning was coming, now he could be certain that he had been woken too early.

"Matthew, the Hell's wrong with you"

"We need to talk to you."

It was a simple response, and that quickly set off the first alarms in Luke's mind. Though nervous, he allowed himself to be led. If the bishop needed to speak with him, then he was going to speak with the bishop. He started to plan his case, and kept working through a scenario in which he could finally win some understanding from his fellow Celts. Even in his tired state he could come up with clever quips and sarcastic jibes he knew could bring him some success in oral debate.

The warehouse was as it always was, unimpressive and gray, almost indiscernible against the aging night sky.

"Come on then lad."

Matthew's voice was rich with frustration and irritation, likely due to being up at this hour as well. He opened the door and with energy pushed Luke inward. O'Gara made a note to punish the knight later for the lack of respect, but that could wait.

The golden trim of the bishop's robes was the first thing to grab O'Gara's attention, their illustrious shimmer, if diminished, was still noticeable amidst the light from the single lit torch in the room. Recovering from Matthew's insult to his pride, O'Gara straightened his back and made good posture.

"Father, good morning, if this can be called such."

O'Neill kept a serious if carefree face, warmly described by the fire.

"Hello Luke." He spoke with intention and purpose, confident in his own manner of speech but irritated at the sudden cockiness of the knight.

O'Gara looked around himself, sensing Matthew was still behind him, and seeing the outlines and silhouettes of John and Mark at the periphery of the torch's aurora. He could also feel another presence in the room, but could not see it amidst the darkness.

"Well, what is the meaning of all...this?" Luke gestured to the room about him, his eyes fixed on the bishop with inquisitiveness. O'Neill opened his mouth and began to speak with a smile.

"Luke, how long have we known each other?"

"Nine years."

"And what have you done in those last nine years?"

Luke hated the bishop's style of questioning, but decided to play along as he searched for an opportunity to intervene and speak.

"Served you."

"More specific please. What actions have you performed, with say one of these?"

O'Neill looked to the outline of O'Conner, who tossed him a sheathed sword.

"Where did you get that?" Luke asked with modest surprise at seeing his comrades armed again.

"Irrelevant. Answer the question."

Luke could infer that if the bishop had a sword, than there were probably arms for everyone in the darkness. Increasingly nervous at the threat of being surrounded by blades, O'Gara answered.

"I've done my fair share of killing."

"Killing what?"

Knowing where O'Neill was going, Luke began his retort.

"Father, your arrogance is leading you into oblivion- I hope you know that. If you would just try adapting to-"

"Answer the question!" O'Conner's voice, deep and demanding rose from the shadows to momentarily silence Luke.

"I know what you are trying to do Father, and if you think that simply by bringing up my past you are going to find something to con-"

"Luke..." O'Neill raised his hand to the knight, who refused to comply at the disrespectful request.

"No! Father, whatever you're planning I assure you doesn't have to happen!" Luke noted how Mark and John were shifting to be on either of his sides, and he could see the glimmer of steel hilts at their sides.

"If you would please just listen to me and let me show you what this island has to offer I guarantee you'll-"

"I'd say you've been taking plenty advantage of what the island has to offer!"

"Shut up Matthew!" Luke turned with aggression to the knight behind him before getting quickly back to pleading his case.

"I've come to see, and Daniel has come to see the goodness in the dragons of this island. We've come to understand what this place and its chief have achieved. Are you really going to-"

"Enough!" O'Neill proclaimed with extra strength in his voice. Luke conceded the floor, hoping to find a new way to further elaborate.

"Nine years we were together Luke. Nine years we served God in our noble endeavors together in Ireland. Two weeks here and you are willing to throw away all that you are? For a woman?" O'Neill's last accusation ignited a fire of defiance in O'Gara who retorted with vigor.

"This isn't about that damned woman you aging idiot! This is the about the fact that Daniel has managed to make inroads for our faith here, certainly far more than you have! He has reconciled the word of God with these people, and in doing so can bring this island into the glorious fold of our faith. He has paved the road to acceptance between both our parties, and it is that road I intend to follow...and certainly not yours."

Luke had expected his open proclamation of defiance to summon some sense of shock or surprise from O'Neill's face. It did no such thing much to Luke's own surprise, as if the bishop was already well aware of the fact.

"Ah yes, the great teacher...the blasphemer." The words spilled from O'Neill's lips with stinging bile and contempt. "Here I had been one to think that he of all people would best understand what we stand for, what we hold so dear to us. To see him be the first to fall under their spell is...regrettable. "

"It is not spells and magic you fool! This is friendship, camaraderie, a mutual understanding that we could bring back home, make our island peaceful for once!"

"Outrageous!" O'Conner spoke up. "And ignore the centuries of bloodshed the devils have caused us? The devastation and misery they have inflicted upon our beloved homeland? On our clans?"

"Do you think this island was always this way you stubborn cur!? This experiment has lasted only six years, and yet it already incredibly successful! They have learned to live with the beasts and work together with them. So then why cannot we, supposedly superior men of God do the same?"

Luke noted how the shadow of John's figure seemed to slowly be retracting his sword, and with an uneven breath continued to speak to O'Neill.

"Father, I beg you. Just open up your mind to the possibilities this island has to offer and I assure you we can make this a true place of God. Please."

The pleading request seemed to be unheard by O'Neill, who only sighed as he responded.

"Oh Luke, a pity this is what's become of you."

The insult was enough for Luke to realize he was going to get nowhere with the bishop. He resolved that further argument was pointless, and decided to end on a condemning note.

"And the same of you."

He turned so as to leave the warehouse, but found this process interrupted by a flash of steel from his right side. Though he tried to avoid the collision, he was forced to feel the stinging pain of metal rip across his chest as he collapsed to the ground with a gasping moan.

"John." O'Neill calmly called the knight's name, stopping him from delivering a more decisive blow to his old rival.

"What?"

"We do have a deal to complete." O'Neill turned behind himself to a vague outline of a large man who kept to the corner of the warehouse. O'Gara, holding back sobs of pain as his hands gripped the bleeding scar over his ribcage tried to make out who the character was while still trying to ascertain how deep the slash had gone.

O'Neill looked behind himself into the darkness and spoke to the shadows.

"I'm assuming given the difficulties this man has given your courtship you would like the final honors?"

The shadow moved slightly in an affirming gesture

"Then he's all yours my good huscarl. We have the rest of our obligations to complete. Finish him as you will and it was pleasure doing business with you.

O'Neill fixed the sword he had received to his side and with a swinging arm motioned the three remaining knights to follow him as they marched out into the pale silver light. Matthew took the one lit torch with him along with another he began to light, leaving Luke alone with the shifting shadow in the barely noticeable sunlight that was just beginning its ascent over the horizon. Amidst pain and short breaths, Luke kept his head up to see a figure slowly walk towards him, each touch of his boot upon the floor a piercing echo against the walls.

Snotlout viewed the sight before him with a malicious enthusiasm. To see the supposed warrior rendered so disabled by a single gash across his sternum was sadistically pleasing.

Here he sat, this damned Celt who had shown him up in battle and stolen the only woman available at the moment for Snotlout to court. This protector of the preacher, a drifter who had come to show up himself and the gods. Snotlout drew closer, his face gently detailed by the rising light.

Luke, ascertaining that the slash was more so a flesh wound than a deep and mortal slice, buried his pain a moment to look into the eyes of this minor rival. This man he had at first unintentionally stolen a woman from, had made a fool of in armed combat and who represented the remaining stubborn elements of the island that intended to do Daniel harm.

"So, can't beat me in the open so you fall back to this is it?"

O'Gara spat out with vindictiveness, upset that despite all his training and what at least he would consider professional and honorable way of going about living, that this would be his end.

Snotlout came within two paces of the knight, and stood over him with a stone face.

Here he was, one of the two symbols of the spiritual plague that was ravishing his island, brought low before Snotlout by a single sword stroke. An offering, a suitable sacrifice to Odin if ever there was one. Rendered lame and laid before him, an outcast betrayed by his own.

Snotlout took another step forward and stopped. Luke looked at him eagerly, accepting his fate and awaiting the final blow. The Viking was hesitating, perhaps savoring the moment?

Despite wanting to draw his knife and give the Gael a nice slice right across the neck, Snotlout found his blood frozen, unwilling to do so. His sole intent of eradicating this Celtic life was held back

as his mind rationalized the scene that had just taken place before him.

This man, this soldierly entity had tried to make his case for the goodness of the island, Snotlout's island. His hand forced its way to the hilt of his knife, but found grasping the blade impossible.

All he had tried to do was what he deemed in the island's best interests, and in the best interests of his fellow Irishmen. He was trying to reconcile the two. While Snotlout was not overly interested in seeing any of the Irish stay, he could at least admit that making such an unpopular stand was respectable.

The Gael had been betrayed, cast out by his peers for the position, and now left to die by his hand. A hand that refused to grip the leather of his knife hilt and draw it from the scabbard.

"I'm waiting..." Luke taunted Snotlout as the sting returned to his chest, death seeming like an increasingly better option as the waves of pain returned and blood continued to flow out of the incision.

He had betrayed his comrades, and so his comrades had betrayed him, leaving him to be finished off by another traitor. Could he not then be betrayed by his own? So many had already abandoned him and the old gods. He was a traitor, surrounded by other traitors.

His deal had been made to protect the village, yet at this point he was just as much betraying it, letting men like the one before him and the one the other Irish would soon be bearing down upon suffer, and forcing the village to grieve them as a result. They would be missed, and he-Snotlout-would be punished for his actions, for his betrayal.

His betrayal. Of his chief and of his tribe. He could find his vengeance now, and betray everyone else, or let the man live and betray himself.

He knelt before O'Gara, who eyed him puzzled as to why the Viking had not finished what he clearly wanted.

"Get up." Snotlout pulled his arm through Luke's shoulders and hoisted the knight up, half dragging him to the doorway.

"Where are you taking me?" Luke inquired as a sharp shock spread across his chest. The wound may not be fatal, but that certainly didn't stop it from hurting.

"The chief's house."

"Why?"

Snotlout threw open the door to the air outside and began to drag the knight awkwardly onto the docks, looking up towards the village that would be an awkward climb with the extra weight. Still, the Viking readied his resolve and upper body strength, and with an uneven breath admitted his new found truth.

"I'm not going to let a good man die."

* * *

><p>The night hadn't been one of Daniel's finest all things considered. His ordeal with Astrid had left him relieved but flustered, and sleep had for the most part escaped him. Every time his eyes finally came to rest, he would find himself uncomfortable and staring back up to the stars. Dawn was making its leisurely way above the horizon, the world the silver color of the moon, the birds that had opted to stay for the winter were welcoming the sunlight with light arias, soon to be silenced by Terrible Terrors that would wake and go to hunt the singers for breakfast.<p>

Against the desires of his mind to go over the night's events again for an uncounted time, Daniel turned his cold but resilient body over in the soft dry grass, seeking some kind of solace in meaningful rest. An old but familiar voice prevented this.

"Daniel?"

The deacon righted himself at the unexpected call, finding the figures of the bishop and three of the knights approaching him. Odd, where was Luke?

"Father? What are-what are you doing here?" O'Rourke asked, his mind though strained quickly coming to grips with reality when he noticed the outlines of blades at the sides of and torches in the hands of the other Irish. He could also see a rope in O'Conner's spare hand. Also odd.

"Ah there you are!" O'Neill proclaimed with a bubbling joy. The three knights quickly took to either side of the bishop and approached the deacon in a line. O'Rourke stood up, knowing the situation had changed somehow if only by the presence of the swords.

"Father, what's going on?" Daniel asked as his eyes sifted between each knight, none of whom seemed particularly interested in seeing him. As O'Neill drew close he began to speak, the knights taking a circular stance around Daniel. Adrenaline began to pump through the deacon's veins at the sudden lack of escape.

"Daniel, we are about to be departing this island, our ship is prepared and all set to disembark upon our return to the docks."

"Okay...what's with the swords then? Has the chief given you back your weapons? And where is Luke?" The questions came quickly to Daniel as he viewed the scene before him skeptically, all the while trying to maintain at least some kind of levelheadedness.

"This is irrelevant." O'Neill brushed off the question with the wave of his hand. Desiring answers and increasingly nervous at being surrounded, Daniel added power to his voice.

"No, I believe it is entirely relevant! Explain yourself father!"

Confident in his position and determined in the final outcome of the situation, O'Neill had no qualms about talking, keeping his usual air of smugness.

"Oh Daniel, this really is a tragedy isn't it?"

"How do you mean?" O'Rourke asked, curious at the sudden changing of subject.

"I had such faith in you at one point my child. I held a belief- it sounds so delusional now- that you and I shared the same goals, the same ideals, that we were both true men of God."

Immediately enraged to have his piety insulted, Daniel took the bishop's moment to breathe as an opportunity to strike back.

"True men of God don't go about poisoning the hosts that take them in."

The biting words brought a tense air to the field, the three knights watching in interest as the young man they had always known as shy and reserved dug in his heels for a contest of words.

"True men of God-"

"True men of God don't abandon their brothers in faith to fall beneath the calls of demons!-O'Neill struck back at his disciple.-True men of God don't throw away a decade of training and sacrifice all that is right just because some lowly isle has given themselves to the ways of the devil!"

Daniel clenched a fist in frustration at the bishop's arrogance before retorting.

"Faith-Stephen." The use of first names brought widened eyes to the knights as the amusing contest of rhetoric increased. "Why in God's name have you been so stubborn all this time? Has my example not been enough to demonstrate that this island is genuine, benevolent, and perhaps livable with? What is it going to take to convince you otherwise?"

"I will not be convinced by a man who allies himself with the very same creatures who took everything from him a decade ago, or did you forget about who you are so soon?"

O'Neill smiled with derision at bringing up the monastery raid to the deacon, who despite his best efforts still showed pain on his face at the memory.

"I have seen what the dragons of this island are capable of; I have seen the joy they can bring into people's lives and their true nature. I am willing to forgive one beast if it means acceptance by the multitudes here."

O'Neill's eyes withdrew into their sockets with the declaration. It was downright heretical, and just what the bishop was looking for.

"So you admit you are in line with them?"

"I am in line with the just and the understanding. I do not side with those who are unwilling to follow the basic tenants of our faith." The knights eyed each other, feeling insulted at the remark but holding their positions as O'Neill spoke for them.

"And so because we refuse to carry out God's will and eradicate this plague, we somehow in turn disobey God?"

"So as God has given us every creature, so I shall protect every creature, even ones that have at one point tried to cause harm to me."

O'Rourke eyed his bible, lying in the grass near where he had been trying to sleep. His knees bent and he made a lunge for the text. Mark and Matthew dropped their torches to the ground and rushed to grab him as he fell to the ground, dragging him away from the book and the small knife they knew he kept in the back of it. They hoisted him up and held his arms behind his back as Daniel tried to kick himself free, finding his legs no match against the battle tested knee caps of his captors.

"Oh no you don't lad!"

O'Neill approached, head tilted at the deacon's sudden determination to fight.

"A shame Daniel. I would have expected out of anyone a man as pious as yourself would have resisted the temptation to abandon the faith and join with these devil riders."

"And since when is it a sin to spread the word of God?" Daniel countered with poison in his tone and a scowl across his face.

"Spread something too thin...and it loses its meaning child."

"Implying that God's love can become meaningless?" Daniel made a mental note to congratulate himself for that clever quip later. That thought was broken by a dull but pronounced pain in his abdomen as O'Neill reeled his arm back for another strike.

"What you have done insults its very meaning! It insults everything we stand for, everything we have fought for, everything we have survived for! Heretic!" The bishop spat out amidst a torrent of blows to Daniel's midsection.

Though weakened after the barrage, Daniel raised his head, and through a curtain of his black hair gave dealt another blow of rhetoric to the bishop.

"If this is so, I would rather die a heretic than a saint." O'Rourke was rather surprised when the defiant proclamation was not met by any surprise, but rather a sadistic acceptance on the bishop's smiling lips.

"Oh...how fitting."

O'Neill turned his head to John who approached with a menacing grin. The Hennessey brothers pushed Daniel out of their grip and into O'Conner, who could hold Daniel back easily with his muscular figure. The Brothers went about gathering the various torches that had fallen upon the ground and raced up towards the top of the field, taking care to ignite some of the mint every few paces.

The bishop held the rope that John had discarded to deal with O'Rourke in his hands as the knight dragged the deacon down the hill towards the thick line of trees that outlined it. Though protesting vehemently, Daniel found any physical action useless against O'Conner's strong figure and any scream he made stifled by the bishop's calloused hand. His muffled objections to his treatment continued along the descent until the three reached a pine of suitable age and thickness as the bishop had deemed necessary.

"He-"

Daniel's scream was cut off by another blow by the bishop as John held him firm against the pine and circled his body with the rope, O'Neill holding him down in position with one hand and pressing him back against the tree with the other. Upon being fully secured, O'Neill took from beneath his robes a rag, and was quick to stuff it into Daniel's mouth.

"So you wish to be a heretic?" The bishop inquired with malevolence in his voice.

Daniel could only look at the man who had used to be his teacher with regret and shame.

"Then I'm sure you are aware as to what we do with heretics."

Daniel's face remained the same, not daring to beg for mercy against a man he knew to be beyond such a feeling.

"They..."

O'Neill extended his arm and directed Daniel's attention to the field, where Matthew and Mark, having begun small but rapidly growing blazes throughout the center of the field had marched across the whole perimeter, lighting the mint ablaze. They threw their torches into the middle of the field, and dashed through the fire to regroup with the bishop.

"...Burn."

The fires began to rapidly spread throughout the high grass, a thick and noxious though aromatically pleasing smoke quickly puffing into the sky as the swirling orange mass spread out to become one with itself. The Hennessey brothers made great speed to catch up with the others, and with the group reunited they made to depart.

"A pity Daniel, I had faith in you. A faith horribly misguided. Goodbye, may God have mercy on your soul."

A muffled response emanated out of Daniel's mouth, incomprehensible amidst the rag held against his tongue. The bishop disregarded the protest as he led the knights down through the trees and towards a path to bring them quickly through the village and to the docks where MacAfee would hopefully be waiting for them.

Daniel could only watch the blaze as it neared, slowly joining into a large inferno that swirled amidst the light wind that only fed it more. He took notice of his bible, still safe but having its security increasingly at risk from the swath of orange destruction that was

carving its way towards both it and the deacon.

It was out of the corner of his eye that he saw the last of the bishop's gilded robes fade into the tree line, a man he had once looked up to on matters of faith and life now the instrument of his death. He held his head down, and prepared to say his final prayers, and started them off with what he had intended to tell the Bishop upon his final words.

And yours as well.

* * *

><p>Just once Astrid wished she could sleep in. Just once she wished she could wake up next to Hiccup feeling fully rested and competent. Instead she found that her sleep cycle had against her will adjusted to the point that she would sometimes wake even earlier than Toothless, leaving her unable seek further rest.<p>

As her eyes opened to the light grey of her and Hiccup's room, the events of last night quickly rushed to her consciousness. It had certainly been...interesting. Daniel's verbal and physical confessions had laid a heavy shroud over her mind.

Was she flattered? Of course. Though despite what she believed to a good mutual understanding between her and Daniel, his admittance of his feelings for her was not going to be an easily resolved issue. With stiff bones she turned to see Hiccup on her left, still asleep and breathing slowly. He almost looked as he did when he was poisoned, but with more color in his face and a healthy aura about him.

She could probably wait to tell Hiccup of the incident with Daniel until a more reasonable time. The fact that his house guest had kissed his wife would only probably upset him, just as much of the fact that she had given him a kiss back.

Oh God, she had kissed him back.

Oh God, she was thinking in the singular now.

It was too early to be confronted with these things, even if only be herself. Yep, she could definitely wait to tell Hiccup about that. She turned back to stare up at the ceiling, wishing her eyes could gain some sense of heaviness and she could wander back to her dreams. She could find no such solace.

Hiccup rustled the furs, causing her to glance over. He had turned to his side a moment before falling back supine. So calm, innocent and non conflicted. Then consciousness would come and it would be back to a changing world and faith. Just another day on Berk.

Astrid took her left arm and slowly slithered it under his neck, brushing the back of hair as she did so. This was usually Hiccup's preferred way of getting close to her, she figured he wouldn't mind if he was asleep. She adjusted her body to become closer, knowing that trying to lay still and fool her body to further rest was beyond her reach at this point.

"Goomorn..." A half coherent and dry sound came from the back of

Hiccup's throat. Astrid stopped her arm as it slid onto his right shoulder and adjusted her body into a wrapping half embrace of her husband's side, her right hand falling over Hiccup's chest.

"Good morning yourself." She felt his heart slowly accelerate as her hand reached up to his neck affectionately.

"Don't think Toothless is even awake yet."

"Nope, guess not." Astrid slid her body in top of Hiccup's slowly, allowing his still sleeping bones to adjust to her weight. She brought her head level to his own, and slowly brought her lips to his own, although he mercifully closed the remaining distance for her.

They remained in such a way for an entire minute, before parting mutually for air and to smile at each other as a high window allowed the first transcendent beams of sunlight into the room, striking the back of Astrid's golden hair and irradiating it.

Astrid arched her back and adjusted her weight, perched on all fours above Hiccup. She whipped back her hair and moved down again, disregarding a sliding weight moving under her night gown that was quickly slipping to the surface.

It slid out from her cleavage before she could even remember it was there or what it was, a silver cross that stopped her descent as it listed aimlessly in the air between her and Hiccup. The two kept their respective positions several moments as the silver ornament dangled, reflecting what sunlight could penetrate into the room. As Astrid's eyes darted up from the silver piece to Hiccup's eyes, the husband gathered the intuitive knowledge to speak.

"Is-is that...Daniel's cross?" He asked, more so confused than angry. Trying to find a way to keep the previous night a conversation for another time, Astrid responded.

"He gave it to me last night...as a gift for us being so understanding towards him."

Hiccup was silent, much to Astrid's consternation.

"He said...said he was grateful for everything we had done for him, and for everything else."

Hiccup stared at the silver cross as it began to hold its position still between his chest and Astrid's. She wanted him to respond, to yell, to do something to break the tension. Why couldn't she have just taken it off and hidden it when she got in last night?

Right, she was too busy thinking about everything that did happen last night.

"H-Hiccup..." She started as her right arm moved to the back of her neck to remove the necklace. "It's-if it bothers you-" She was stopped as Hiccup's own arm, though slow with fatigue reached up and stopped her with a light brush against her raised elbow.

"No..." He began with a small smile rearing itself upon his cheek. "It's alright. It looks good on you."

Astrid reciprocated the pleasant look and lowered herself again to her husband's face, the cross flattening against his chest. They kissed again, deeper and for a longer time than before as Astrid flattened her body against Hiccup's. After a moment, she separated again, peering into Hiccup's green eyes with an appreciative expression.

"Thank you Hiccup. For everything."

The way he looked back into the oceans of her eyes could only be described as the most joyful defeatism imaginable.

"For you my dear, anything."

Though intended this as a gesture of romance, Astrid could feel riding on the coattails of the phrase a momentary hesitancy.

"You don't have to do this for me." She replied, trying to offer her husband the out she knew a part of him still wanted. Whatever part of him this was, it was not present in his own reply.

"I don't have to, I want to." His smile returned and Astrid couldn't help but return it and lean in for another kiss. If he was this accepting of something as direct as this, the previous night couldn't be that big an issue to settle.

She leaned into him with as much weight as she could. The back of his throat elicited the slightest dry moan as they shifted and slowly slid against each other. A feint but constant roar could be heard from outside, which both took for the moment to be Toothless waking up as the sound reverberated through the roof. It persisted longer than normal, which both continued to disregard amidst their mutual passion.

Astrid broke the present kiss and lifted her head slightly, brushing her nose with Hiccup's softly. Amidst his own admittedly unpleasant morning breath she could smell feint wisps of a sweet and familiar aroma.

"I smell mountain mint."

"Mmmmmh...Valka must be making tea already." Hiccup muttered out as he went for a light kiss on the top of Astrid's nose. Astrid didn't consider her own words much as she went for another on his lips.

"Nah, we ran out yesterday, need to go get some more this afternoon."

While the moment of the kiss prohibited any kind of rationalizing thought, when the two broke again they took notice of the increasing din outside in the distance, increasingly punctuated by staccato changes in pitch and long, bass level calls that sounded more and more like human speech.

The two looked into each other's eyes, love and wistfulness giving way to interest and speculation. Despite not wanting to break from Hiccup's proximity, Astrid crawled out from his side and onto the cold floor, making her way awkwardly towards the closed cut out where

Toothless would normally enter the room. The noise grew louder, and Astrid started to affirm there were human voices in a hurried state passing quickly outside. As Hiccup sat up in the bed, reaching over for his prosthetic, she opened the window.

"Fire!"

Masses of the villagers were quickly scurrying out of their houses and into bucket brigades. Odd, Astrid thought. Why were they not using their dragons?

She peered off to where the villagers were going, up towards the small woods at the outskirts of the village from where a warm wind caressed her face and directed her attention to a large and noxious cloud falling over the village.

Right, burning mountain mint renders dragons almost useless.

Mountain mint...

Daniel...

She turned to Hiccup with a rapidly worrisome face as he was hoisting up his pants, having heard the same proclamation as Astrid when she had opened the window.

"Fire?"

"Yeah, from the fields."

"Get dressed and let's go then!"

His voice grew frantic and alert in recognition that chiefly duties awaited him. Astrid leaped for a proper skirt and quickly changed into it along with a red tunic, forgoing her usual armored ornaments for the sake of time. In the same moment Hiccup grabbed a heavier tunic, and right shoulder pad emblazoned with the Berk crest. He motioned Astrid to follow him as he ignored the other elements of his armor that could wait till later. He opened the door from their bedroom and the two made their way downstairs. Astrid kept a look over her shoulder to the bed where Daniel should be sleeping.

It was empty.

Oh dear...

Valka greeted the two as she emerged from behind the stair case and presented them with an equally concerned face.

"Fire spreading down from the mountain mint fields."

"Have you seen Daniel this morning Valka?" Astrid asked with fleeting hope.

"He wasn't here when I woke up and I doubt he rises any earlier than I do."

Hiccup and Astrid met each other's gazes with worry. Hiccup, in remembering his station was quick to speak.

"Well, we better get underway then."

A series of slow but resounding knocks came from the front door after Hiccup finished. Assuming it to be one of the villagers coming to rally the chief, Hiccup was quick to make his way to the door to assure the person that he was up and ready. When he opened the door to have a Celt with a bloody chest thrown into him be a weary Snotlout, he was more than a little surprised.

"Ah! Snotlout...what is-what is this?"

"I can explain and you can punish me for it later. We have more pressing matters to get to."

Valka quickly came up from behind Hiccup and took the pained and still bleeding O'Gara from him, felling him upon the kitchen table and with Astrid's assistance getting him in a position suitable to treat him.

"What the Hel's going on?" Hiccup demanded again, the sight of Luke seeming to be a very random occurrence considering the more pressing issue blazing outside.

"It'll take too long to explain, right now we have more important issues."

Despite Hiccup's usual desire to have information, he knew Snotlout was right considering the urgency of the situation.

"Alright, but I expect a pretty good story when this is all said and done." He began to follow Snotlout out the door when they were both stopped by an urgent request from the knight on the table.

"Stop!"

All in the room turned back to the knight, who painfully held out an arm pleading for all to pay heed to him.

"Chief Hiccup...the bishop. He's...he's ahhhhhh..." O'Gara groaned as a large hemorrhage overcame him, thick red blood seeping out of his scar.

"He's going after...going after Daniel, wherever he is. Might have...might have something to do with the fire. Trying to leave...stop him."

O'Gara ended his plea as he growled between his teeth at another surge of pain. Astrid, alit with a desire for a final glorious vengeance on the hated bishop looked to Hiccup, equally inspired with the same sentiment.

"Alright then. Valka, stay here and take care of Luke. Let's go you two." Hiccup grabbed his sword from amidst his riding gear and was satisfied to see it was prepared for combat. The trio stepped outside to a few calls of salutation and respect to the chief.

"Toothless!" Hiccup called, admiring the smell that burning mountain mint, despite it being indicative of the oncoming

danger.

"Toothless!" He called again walking onto a rock to give him a proper view of the angle of his roof where Toothless slept. The black reptilian mass did not respond, too engrossed in its own addiction to the sweet smell, euphoria carrying it away from earth and any sense of urgency or danger.

"Come on Toothless I need you bud!" The dragon refused to move still.

"Toothless!" Hiccup threw a small rock up onto the roof. It reflected off the dragon's wing and fell back off the roof. The beast moved not save for the shallow inhalation and exhales of its breathing.

"Thank you for nothing you useless reptile!" Hiccup yelled with irritation. Quickly determining a new course of action, he turned back to his wife and cousin.

"Alright...Snotlout, go organize and take control of the bucket brigades. Astrid-" He stopped a moment as he saw the look on her face, requesting a very particular assignment. "Go see if you can find Daniel and make sure he's alright."

Hiccup turned on the two and went to make his way down towards the docks.

"Where are you going?" Snotlout asked. Hiccup stopped and turned his head to his cousin, annoyed at being delayed at what he desired.

"I'm heading down to the docks. If the bishop intends to leave I want to see him off..." Hiccup clicked the spring in his sword and it ejected into a ready and blood craving position.

"Personally."

* * *

><p>Taking its time and savoring every blade of grass it absorbed into annihilation, the fire crept towards Daniel. Though the fire itself did not care one way or the other what could happen to the deacon, it went about the business that all fires took, and destroyed everything in its path. It neared him rapidly, the dry grass providing the perfect conditions for it to spread. Many trees to Daniel's right and left were already lit and paving the way for the fire to move closer towards the village.<p>

Daniel pulled at the ropes as much as he could, trying to find some way to loosen them but finding the knot well tied and sturdy. He was simply exhausting his strength and he knew it. Still, he found that it at least expended the adrenaline pumping through his blood through the heavy exertion, in its wake leaving his body drained and at relative ease. The only profitable to come of this was that his furious lashings had made the rag in his mouth loose enough for him to spit out, allowing him to take deeper, if more difficult breaths.

The orange glow of the blaze strained his eyes and illuminated his skin in a creamy hue, the sweet but noxious smell of the burning

grass making each breath he took increasingly shallow and painful. The roar of the engulfing inferno surrounded him, deafening not in volume but in that it manifested his coming fate.

Still, the blaze directly in front of him crept closer, taking its time and taunting him, phantasms and fears manifesting and disappearing before the deacon in the shifting fire.

This was the end. The end of the life of a deacon Daniel O'Rourke. Was this what God had planned for him? Was this really his purpose in life, to be killed by fires lit by his fellow men of God? How could the divine, his constant protector and that to which he had devoted his life allow this to happen?

The fire before him roared with a new found energy and desire to consume. Its growing proximity making breathing increasingly difficult for the deacon as an increasingly unpleasant heat wrapped around his body.

How could God forsake him to this? To give him such an opportunity to do His work and then subject him to this. To tempt him and then leave him to be betrayed. Was that all this was about, the temptation of Astrid? Could this all simply be punishment for that? Certainly not a fair trade.

The fire burst forward again with a new found ferocity. Daniel could feel the heat slowly beginning to burn the very top of his skin, his breathing increasingly erratic and strained. To his side, the blaze continued to march unopposed through the forest, enveloping him in a cocoon of fire and destruction.

Feeling his final moment at hand, Daniel let his head sink, his hair falling over him and screening his face for a moment from the heat. Despite his questions, he resolved if were to die, he would die the way he had lived

"The lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me by the still waters."

The fire stalled in its advance, piety and devotion freshly pumping with vigor through Daniel's veins. The crackle of burning grass persisted, but the heat of the encroaching blaze faltered and retreated, stymied by the sudden reaffirmation of resistance that flowed out of the deacon.

"He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake."

The fire roared back in retaliation, demanding the fear that it had until recently been inducing to return. Its request was denied.

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

Despite all that the fire desired, to be feared and to incite doubt, it advanced no further. Encouraged with a returning sense of his lifelong devotion, Daniel continued to speak.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies,

thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Daniel's last words held in the air a moment, as if doing battle with the encroaching fire. The blaze, though moving all around him and engulfing the woods behind him held its ground before him, in a standoff with the deacon's devotion. Daniel raised his head, ignoring the annoying strands that still hung over his face and looking into the inferno, un-intimidated and renewed with faith.

"Forever."

He growled at the blaze in defiance. Though absorbing all the fuel available to it, it proceeded no further towards him. Only the cackle of trees and grass being absorbed into the plasma of destruction made any notable noise as the deacon stared down the blaze, the strain on his eyes no issue as the fire idled, stymied by piety.

"Daniel?"

O'Rourke's face-off with the fire was broken by a distinct feminine voice from behind him. Though he could not turn to see if it was close, he gathered what air he could and made an attempt to call back.

"Astrid?"

"Daniel where are you?"

"Over here, follow my voice!"

A grin of unequalled joy came across Daniel's face as he heard boot soles pounding on the ground behind him and a rustling through the burning foliage. From his left, casting aside burning branches Astrid stormed quickly to his side, as much an angel to his eyes as anything.

"Astrid!"

"Daniel!" She rushed to him, quickly looking over the ropes and looking for the knot in the rope. She found it quickly and dug into it, pulling at every loose piece to undo the knot.

"God bless you Astrid."

"We can do that later, we have to go now!" She put emphasis on the last word as a large branch behind her collapsed into the inferno which was more than eager to quickly feed upon it.

The ropes soon weakened and Daniel pushed himself up and off the tree, gripping his abdomen from the bishop's assault as he did so. Astrid pulled on his arm as he righted himself.

"Come on!" She was surprised when Daniel pulled away from her and directed his body towards the fire.

"Not yet. My bible is still there, I'm not leaving without it."

"Daniel if we don't leave now we're going to get caught in the middle of this!" Astrid's voice though stern was indicative of the nagging possibility of death the longer the two of them stayed in the inferno. Still the deacon persisted, and quietly advanced towards the fire.

"Daniel!" Astrid's cry for him to return was lost on his ears as he came to the precipice. Just a few feet away, still spared from the encroaching blaze the bible rested innocently in the grass, without a care for the symphony of destruction that surrounded it. Though his body was hot from the blaze, he was not burned. Though the air was heavy with smoke, he breathed in heavily. With a single exhale, he took another step.

Recalling an astounding memory, Astrid watched as Daniel once again entered the fire, clothes refusing to catch and body unwilling to waver in the face of flaming opposition. He stepped forward again, and kept to such a way several more paces before he reached down and picked up the text. He held it above his head a moment much to Astrid's delight, though this lasted only a moment before her practical side felt a compulsion to bring up the current moment again.

"Okay great, now can we go?"

Daniel silently acknowledged the urgency in her tone and with two good leaps of legs and faith crossed the blaze to Astrid's side again. He smiled at his own presence near her a moment, before this was broken by memories of the preceding evening and by another falling and crashing branch.

"We should...be going." The pair turned, too concerned with survival to address their own personal matters and made to get out of the swirling inferno enclosed around them.

The one problem? The inferno had already closed around them.

Outside their own circle a few feet in diameter, fire surrounded them. No matter which way they turned, a powerful wall of flame encapsulated them, presenting them only with a cell of destruction in which to live.

"What do we do now?" Astrid asked, rather irritated that Daniel spent precious time retrieving his book instead of immediately escaping when there was a chance. The deacon remained resolute, and with a clear mind focused to the part of the blaze most in front of them.

"Astrid?"

"Mmmh?"

"Take my hand."

"What?" Astrid inquired, uncertain why Daniel was insisting on this one action. He extended his own out to hers, pleading for cooperation.

"Do you trust me Astrid?"

"What?"

"Trust me Astrid. Trust in god, and it will be alright."

Astrid felt the silver cross she was still wearing as it rested below her cleavage. Though hesitant about how much she did trust the deacon, she let her own hand connect with his own. Renewed by the touch and with a smile of serenity on his face, Daniel redirected his attention towards the encroaching fire. He pulled at Astrid's arm and she followed, though with hesitation and the slightest tingling of fear as the two neared the blaze. Daniel's other hand in which he held his bible was extended before him, challenging the fire as the two approached.

"Do you trust in the Lord Astrid?" Daniel exclaimed as they drew within a few inches, Astrid's arm growing heavy with resistance at the fierce blaze which gathered all of its strength before the two.

"Mmmmmhfff" was all she could respond with as another branch fell a few inches away from her, fear taking hold over her body.

"Astrid, do...you...trust me?" Daniel requested an answer again as he reached out into the flame, finding the fire regaining its strength and determination to trap the two.

"Yes!" She pronounced, her head darting all around her as the forest burst into a swirling vortex of destruction. Her breathing was growing strained, sweet smelling but suffocating smoke enveloping her.

"Do you trust God Astrid?" Daniel was forceful in his inquisition, knowing all too well the gravity of the situation. Astrid was quiet a moment, drawing closer to Daniel as the fires swept closer to her feet.

"Astrid!" Daniel demanded an answer as his hand was held firmly back by the inferno. Astrid, still holding the deacon's hand and moving to his side, forced her tongue to finally admit what she had discovered to be true.

"Yes!" She yelled, both at Daniel and the encroaching inferno. "I believe."

The fire, though still burning as fiercely as ever seemed to halt, to be shocked by the declaration. Daniel turned his head to Astrid with appreciation, eyes momentarily locking with hers before the two looked towards the fire in front of them.

Daniel took one pace, Astrid another. Daniel took a step into the fire. Astrid, faltering for only a tepid second moved her left leg directly into the fire. Though she expected the normal response, her sensation was notably different than any she had ever had around other fires.

Nothing.

She felt as though she were discovering flight again, as if she was surrounded by the magic that had permeated her body that first night

with Hiccup and Toothless. Guided by another man she had never expected to change her life, she took another step directly into the inferno. Daniel's free hand remained forward of his body, his bible carving a path through the fire as Astrid's steps grew more confident as each one snuffed the fire where she walked with her boot.

The swirling vortex of flame parted ways for her and Daniel as they continued to walk another dozen yards before finally exiting the enveloping fires. They made a few more hurried paces to be safely way from the encroaching destruction. The two stopped and turned back towards the blaze before turning back to each other. Astrid's hand fell from Daniel's as the risk of immediate death was no longer prevalent.

"That was...that was..." Astrid tried to find a word to describe the experience, the occurrence of her walking through fire to emerge unscathed.

"That is faith Astrid." Daniel finished her sentence, keeping the hand that had joined with hers to his side. "You have it Astrid, I knew you did."

Astrid smiled at the compliment a moment, but the way in which Daniel was leaning over and the look of pain on his face made the Viking quickly move on to more pressing matters.

"Daniel, what happened?"

The deacon was quick to shift from appreciation for their escape from the fire to the issue he knew Astrid needed to know.

"The bishop and the other knights came to me. Said I was a heretic and tied me to the tree, then set the fire intending to kill me. If you hadn't come along..." He implied the worst with his silence, though Astrid cut through his allusions and kept to the situation at hand.

"The bishop, is he trying to escape?"

"He said he was departing before they attacked me so I would assume so."

Astrid, determined now in what had to be done and feeling a great wave of courage come over her grabbed the bible from O'Rourke's hand, flipped to its back cover and removed the small, slim but no less sharp knife from its built in sheath, turning it over in her hands a few times to grasp the weight of it.

"You say only God can forgive?"

"Yes..." Daniel replied hesitantly, noting how Astrid was tightening her grip on the knife as she handed the bible back to Daniel.

"Then let's give him someone to forgive."

* * *

><p>Having carved an awkward path through infrequently trodden woods, O'Neill and the knights had managed to make their way to the beach rather quickly. They were quick to find their bearings and with as

quick a pace as the sand and the bishop's age allotted raced to the docks. They knew the fire would act as a perfect distraction long enough for them to board MacAfee's ship and escape away before anyone would notice they were gone, hopefully.<p>

"Matthew, I trust you made sure MacAfee was up and ready for us."

"Provided he didn't role back to sleep he should be father."

"Very good."

The four moved briskly. They could hear from over the steep ledges the panicked shouts and frantic attempts at organization going on by the villagers to combat the blaze that sent smoke further and further upwards into a bellowing mushroom that the Hennessey's couldn't help but take pride in.

"Beautiful, if tragic." Mark addressed the grey shroud that clashed against the red canvas of the coming dawn.

"There is nothing tragic about heathens dying my child...especially ones like these."

"It's not that, there was just so much mead in that hall, a pity it's going to waste."

"You know there's supposedly a hall in Kerry where all they serve is wine instead of mead. Quite a luxurious place from what I hear."

"We should pay it a visit when we return brother, share a few rounds for our triumph."

"What have I told you about getting inside my head Mark?"

"Well I can't help it if brothers just have this connection with-"

"Please keep your discussions of fraternal bonds to another time gentlemen, let us focus on getting off this flaming rock a moment shall we?"

O'Neill put an end to the brothers' conversation and redirected their attention to the docks ahead of them. An entire fleet of ships both rigged for war and trade lay dormant and gently rocking in the waves. The four kept their eyes peeled in all directions for activity. It seemed the entire village had been conscripted to the duties of fighting the blaze. Perfect.

"There's MacAfee's ship on the center wharf, come on!"

The bishop accelerated his pace as much as he could as the knights kept close to him. The high mast of MacAfee's vessel, designed for great voyages against hostile waters stood high and proud against the winds that were sweeping off the mountain and bring flaming destruction to the village of heathens that stood on the cliffs above them.

The group made quick march over the boardwalk and to the wharf where MacAfee's ship was docked, no ships would block it in, they could be

on open ocean in a matter of minutes.

"God does provide." The bishop muttered to himself as the four approached. They were more relieved to see the trader walk to front of his ship, arms folded behind his back and looking professional.

"Trader, good morning, I trust everything is in order?"

MacAfee was quiet, eyeing the other Irish with a straight face. The lack of expression left the Celts curious as they drew closer.

"Trader, are we set to get underway?" O'Neill stopped, sensing all was not right with the trader and their situation. The knights stopped as well and drew close to the bishop, equally curious to the trader's demeanor. Braden extended his arms to their span, and with half a grimace and half a twisted smile he addressed the group.

"I'm sorry your holiness, but business is business, and I like good business."

O'Neill did not want to have to speak cryptic messages out in the open, and started to make his way to the gangplank laid out for them. He was stopped when a brown haired head rose from behind the solid railings of the vessel.

"Even if it done at the end of a sword." MacAfee added as Hiccup stretched to his full posture and walked with intent and purpose to the top of the gangplank, sword firmly gripped and eager for blood.

"Going somewhere bishop?" Hiccup asked as he began his descent. The knights drew their swords and resolved themselves to strike as soon as the order was given.

"Why chief Hiccup!" O'Neill exclaimed with a veil of smugness and confidence. "I would have expected you to be up in your village, it seems there is a fire threatening it."

"Yes..." Hiccup began as he planted both feet on the wharf, positioning his legs into a battle ready stance. "I wonder what could have started that." He growled towards the Gaels, both sides brimming with anticipation for conflict. Hiccup swallowed a wavering breath. He had never actually had to kill someone before, but if he had to kill all four of these Irishmen he was determined to find the will to do so.

"Well if I had to guess..."

"Enough of your words Stephen. I know you're behind this, behind all of this. I know you tried to poison me. What I just want to know is why."

Hiccup gestured his sword lightly at the bishop, giving him a moment of mercy to explain himself. The knights, not understanding the Norse spoken by either party, watched both carefully and kept up their guard.

"I had a...delusion about one of my subordinates-that he would be a

good and true man of faith. I had believed that he would be able to sway the people of this island to abandon the devils you call friends and follow the way of Jesus. Rest assured I had never intended to kill you..."

"Well that's comforting." Hiccup broke in with biting sarcasm.

"...merely to render you unable to interfere with this process. Unfortunately...this subordinate of mine decided it better to dilute and insult our faith rather than spread it. We have thus taken care of this problem and hopefully have stopped the conversion. You will not have to deal with this problem any further."

Hiccup broke his gaze from the bishop a moment to look up to the cloud of smoke bellowing over the cliffs.

"You...you killed Daniel?"

"Not directly no. We are after all Christians ourselves, such a thing would be sinful. Should the fires of retribution claim him however..." O'Neill rubbed his hands together as if washing them without water. "...it is of no concern to us."

Hiccup brought his sword back up to a threatening position, a true warrior's face manifesting itself.

"If anything I though you would be rather grateful chief Hiccup. With no more deacon, what roots have been laid for our faith will fall away shortly. You and your devils can go back to your unholy accord and be left alone by us." The bishop smiled in self gratification at his words, deeming them to be of sound argument and deliverance. Hiccup steadied his sword hand and his voice to retaliate.

"I would be grateful...if I wanted to see the deacon dead."

The bishop curved his head in skepticism at the words, not having imagined them to come from the chief.

"But I have seen goodness and sincerity in him. I may not understand your faith yet, but I understand good men. Daniel is one of them...and you are not."

Hiccup generated a spark in his sword and the Nightmare saliva coated blade burst into a wafting and intimidating fusion of fire and steel. The knights took a collective step back at the foreign and undoubtedly menacing looking blade, even if they could smell the hesitation in its wielder.

"And Berk has a new policy towards bad men."

Hiccup took a step forward with his metal leg, making sure to strike it hard against the wood and letting the intimidating clunk have its intended effect on the group. The bishop remained steadfast and refused to show fear. He placed a hand on his sword, fingers slowly clasping around the hilt. The moment the scrape of the blade against the scabbard could be heard, the Hennessey brothers sensing battle rushed Hiccup.

The chief was quick to turn over his sword and held down a trigger,

releasing a torrent of Zippleback gas. The knights, surprised by the sudden and unexpected tactic slowed to try and understand what was happening. Hiccup stepped back as he sprayed the entire canister to completion. The heavy gas hung over the dock a moment before the knights resolved themselves to press through it. The moment they did so, Hiccup whipped around his blade and with the slightest touch of the fire ignited the cloud, turning away just in time to not be seared by the ferocious explosion that followed

The knights were propelled to either direction, Mark falling into the water, Matthew colliding with MacAfee's boat before also falling into the waves. Their screams of burning pain were garbled by the waves as they each sought something to grab on to address their injuries.

Surprised by the sudden action, John and Stephen, each with blades ready approached with a more disciplined pace. Hiccup knew that his trick was only going to work once, that actual blade on blade action was to follow now. Never his strong suit, but vengeance and resolve are powerful counter arguments to poor self-image.

"You seem to know more magic than I had expected, chief." Stephen addressed Hiccup without fear, only with determination that he get on MacAfee's boat and escape, and that this heathen impediment to that action lay strewn across the dock in a puddle of pagan blood.

"It comes with befriending devils." He retorted sternly.

"I would figure."

O'Neill muttered before he and John simultaneously lunged towards Hiccup. The chief stepped back to deflect John's attack before cutting upward at the bishop who pulled back just in time to avoid the flaming blade. Hiccup made a second attempt to go for Stephen, but this hack was blocked by John. Hiccup fell back as O'Neill tried to swing at him from the side.

Hiccup did not have a second to steady himself before John came at him with a battle cry and a powerful swing over his shoulder. Though Hiccup could block the strike with his sword again, his arm buckled under the strength of the Celt.

Curse his persistent lack of muscles.

He moved back again to avoid a stab from the bishop before retaliating with a furious trio of hacks at the two, each one being dodged or blocked. He had to end this and fast, he could feel his strength, or what he at least called it draining with each deflection, the reverberation of steel against steel vibrating his muscles into gelatin.

Another series of overhead blows by John and Stephen were either deflected or avoided by Hiccup as the three combatants parried back and forth over the wharf.

MacAfee watched them with interest, enjoying the violent show before him. He wasn't quite sure who to root for. He knew if the bishop won he was not going to hear the end of it on the voyage back to Ireland. If Hiccup won-and provided the trader did not lose his head for his actions-he was almost certainly going to lose his trading rights and

privileges on the island. Neither outcome seemed promising, but such is the life of a trader.

The chief's swings and lunges grew increasingly frantic as the issues inherent in battling two men, and with only one real leg to boot came to show themselves. John continued to throw himself at Hiccup without relent, the bishop holding off to allow the true warrior fury of the knight to manifest itself. Hiccup continued to try to get a nick, a scrape, something on the knight to distract him even for a second.

O'Neill hadn't been kidding that first night when he said that John's skills with the long-sword were impressive. Hiccup only wished that he did not have to be the one to have this fact demonstrated to.

Hiccup continued to try and gain an advantage over the Celt, but found every effort he made only sapped his strength more and more. The flame on his sword had used up all its fuel, leaving him only with a sturdy albeit intimidating vegetable peeler of a weapon against a well made Berkian long sword.

Where had they gotten those swords? He could address that later when he wasn't at risk of dying.

He managed to deflect John's sword off to the side and came in underhanded to deliver an upward slash. John pulled away, but not without Hiccup finally managing to draw a thin but noticeable streak of blood on the knight. He was relieved at this, though disheartened when the warrior's face did not flinch, and his muscles tightened to prepare for another attack.

Were the Irish always this ignorant of their own pain?

The two stood a few feet apart from each other, catching breath and looking for weak spots. If Hiccup could just keep wearing the knight down, maybe he could find an opportunity to exploit the cut he had given the Gael. The only problem was that he was likely going to get worn down before the knight.

Refusing to consider himself weak at this moment, he charged again, clashing his blade with O'Conner's and pushing down with all his strength. John held his sword with both hands, pushing back against the blow with classic Celtic stubbornness. He could as well feel his strength being sapped by the gentle trickle of blood coming from his midsection, but he was not going to see himself defeated by a man with only three limbs.

Hiccup relented and hopped to gather his strength again, but John came overhead before any such thing could be done. Hiccup shifted to his side, hoping to drive his sword into John's back while it was exposed. He was not prepared for John to dive deeper than expected, pivot to right, and in one motion wrap his sword under Hiccup's legs.

Hiccup was startled when he couldn't feel the ground, and more startled when the sky began to rotate, and especially worried when his head hit the wood and his sword fell from his hand and away from him.

John grinned as he stood over Hiccup, droplets of blood from the chief's one successful strike still trickling down his cloak. He spun his sword in his hand and grinned with malevolence. Hiccup squirmed and twisted to get his sword before noticing the knight raising his blade. Struck with fear and memories of the Battle of the Sanctuary, Hiccup froze as the blade descended.

It did not penetrate his flesh as he had expected, but had fit snugly and with force into the gap in his metal leg that he had designed to make it lighter and more sturdy. Smiling as he let go of the hilt of his own sword, John moved over and picked up Hiccup's sword just out of the chief's reach. He held it up, admiring its construction.

"Give that to me!" Hiccup yelled as he regained his nerve and tried to rise and continue the fight. A single forceful kick from John right to his chest sent him back down onto the wood, leg still pinned by the long-sword. John, satisfied at Hiccup's position turned to the bishop, who had watched with pride as the knight once again showed his worth.

"Athair, an onÃ³racha deiridh..." (Father, the final honors)

John stepped aside, finally taking time to look at his wound as he motioned to the helpless chief with his sword, both to make reference to him as well to use the point of the blade to keep the chief pinned.

"Go raibh maith agat, mo leanbh." (Thank you, my child.) The bishop spoke with confidence and determination as he lowered his sword to his side and approached Hiccup with a smile of impending victory. He stood over Hiccup as would a hunter over trapped prey.

"I may not have wanted to kill you before, but now..."

He smirked as he raised the blade over his head, prepared to execute the chief once and for all.

"Hiccup!"

God it seemed had other plans.

All three men turned to see Astrid racing down the wharf, Daniel keeping behind at a cautious pace. The sight of the shield-maiden charging them with fire in her eyes and a knife in her hand intimidated the Irish, and Hiccup as well. Sensing he had further work to do in defending his bishop, John charged Astrid with Hiccup's sword.

Astrid stopped in her tracks and readied for the charge. John raised the blade to his face and charged intending to stab. Following years of training and living up to her reputation, Astrid stood fearless before the charging Celt. As he neared, she sprang into action.

In one fluid motion, she deflected his attack to the side and lunged right into his abdomen with Daniel's knife, plunging it in as deep as her fury would allow her. She extracted it and struck again, and a third time, and a fourth, and after the first dozen she lost count as the steel found a new target every few seconds and inches apart. She then took Hiccup's sword from John's weakened hands, and after an

elbow to the jaw cut the blade quickly across the knight's throat before shoving him into the water a wound filled and bleeding mess.

O'Neill watched shocked as his knight was dispatched with such haste and vigor, his body quickly falling beneath the waves as death overcame the warrior. Hiccup was amazed and relieved at Astrid's presence, and glad to see Daniel alive. Mostly Astrid though. Damn she was hot when she was killing people. Did he just think that? That could be addressed later.

Astrid handed Daniel back his knife and took Hiccup's sword in both her hands, steadying herself a moment before charging with a cry as masculine in its ferocity as it was feminine in its pitch. O'Neill quickly pivoted and made for a defensive position, prepared for a true battle and confident despite his age in his abilities.

One does not spend a decade in the presence of knights and not pick up a few things.

Astrid intended one decisive strike O'Neill's neck, but he managed to swing his sword up to drive the blade away before moving in close and striking her with the pommel of his sword, a trick he had picked up from O'Gara. Astrid groaned at the hit but recovered, pushing the bishop away from her and making a quick stab towards his chest. Stephen backed out of the way and delivered a rapid series of looping swings at Astrid, whose youthful agility served her well to avoid.

Despite his concern for his wife's safety amidst the ongoing duel, Hiccup managed a glance every few moments to Daniel, who stood away behind Astrid and watching. They met eyes, and Hiccup gestured with his expression to the blood stained knife the deacon held in his hands. He was pleading with the deacon to join the fight, to help his wife and the woman he knew the deacon liked, although the particulars of that like were not yet known to him. Still, Daniel hesitated even as Astrid and O'Neill's swords came together in a loud clang as a test of strength began.

Daniel's grip on the knife was slippery from John's blood, its smell slowly wafting into his nose. He was trembling at the moment, all of it. He hated the bishop, wanted to see pain caused to him, wanted to see the woman he loved kill him and survive herself. Still, another part of him wished to intervene, to have his own personal vengeance on the man who had just tried to have him burned alive. And then he would be unclean, a killer, a true sinner. Right? Wasn't it wrong to kill, to seek revenge? His grip on the blade alternated in pressure as his distressed mind tried to process dogma and theology at too fast a pace. He was student, not a soldier. Life or death decisions were not his forte, especially when it came to something as complex as the Word of God.

Astrid and O'Neill continued to exchange blows, the former increasingly surprised at the tenacity and skill of the bishop as he parried and exchanged attacks as well as any soldier. Daniel hesitantly stepped forward at Hiccup's continued silent pleading, but couldn't find it within himself to advance further, indecision and confliction of faith constantly adjusting the way he held the knife.

O'Neill whipped his sword around his head, and before Astrid could make the easy strike at his abdomen he had come down against her with enough force to knock Hiccup's sword from her grip. He quickly flicked the blade back up and caught her cheek.

"Astrid!"

Her head arched back, and the bishop was quick to turn his sword to its pommel again and slid towards her, delivering another blow to her abdomen. Losing her balance on a warped piece of wood, she tripped onto her back. The bishop came in quickly, sword raised above his head, and with a grunt he swung it downward.

The weapon found itself denied the taste of more blood by a small knife that, though buckling under the force had caught the sword before it could find its target. Both O'Neill and Astrid looked with shock as Daniel, face determined and eyes afire used what strength he had to slide the knife up the blade and bring it up and away from Astrid.

O'Neill quickly drew away, Daniel pursuing with vigor as he swiped and attacked without any real form or training but absolutely determined to put this battle to an end.

"You should be dead." O'Neill growled at the deacon as the two stood off from each other.

"Likewise." Daniel replied with equal severity in his voice. Astrid looked on as the deacon, despite his character and typical demeanor held his ground on the field-technically wharf- of combat.

"I suppose if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself."

Daniel placed the bible still in hand on the ground beside him with his ever present reverence for the text. He rose slowly, gathering his faith and strength and expelling his fears in a single breath

"Preach."

Daniel lunged, despite not knowing what his exact position to attack was at the bishop.

"Daniel!" Knowing he did not stand a chance in combat, Astrid got to her knees, and looked around for Hiccup's sword, finding it nowhere around her. Hiccup, separated from her by the deacon and bishop mouthed "water" to her. Damnit.

O'Neill attempted to strike Daniel with a hack from the right, but the deacon managed a block with the knife, though he was forced to shift to his side a pace to absorb the impact against his small weapon and weak structure.

Curse his lack of muscles.

O'Neill came in again from over the top, Daniel again blocked, unable to find a moment worthy enough to strike at. Another blow came, and then another and the result was the same. Astrid watched nervously, finding an inability to intervene not conducive to her warrior

spirit. Daniel retreated back as the blows kept coming, maybe if she could just catch the bishop off guard with her hands she could disarm and then kill him?

"Heretic!" O'Neill proclaimed as his sword came down again with enough force to not only push down the knife handle in Daniel's hand but sending his entire arm down with the force.

"Pharisee!" Daniel screamed back as he struck upwards with the knife. O'Neill caught the blade and motioned it away with the hilt of his sword. Daniel recovered from the parry and tried slicing at the bishop's face. O'Neill took a step back, dodged, and stabbed forward.

Contact.

"No!"

The blade struck just above Daniel's heart, driving into his lung, stopping as it grazed the rib and the strike ran out its rather weak momentum. Daniel had taken a step back at the moment of impact, and for the moment stood listless and disoriented. His head, which had at the point of contact looked down to where the sword met his flesh, slowly came back up, a pained look upon it as it stared at the bishop.

O'Neill looked at the sight with as strong a face as he could muster. The fact that this was the same man that had once been a frightened boy at a monastery a decade ago, the fact that he had absorbed every teaching of he and the church, and been akin to a friend back in Ireland, meant nothing now. They weren't supposed to. This man, with blue eyes that shimmered with an innocent reverence for everything holy, was a heretic, and that was all that mattered.

Daniel said nothing for a moment, the entire area seemed quiet. Even the din or the village fighting the fire seemed to have dropped low. Astrid and Hiccup eyed each other from opposite sides of the confrontation in mutual shock, Astrid particularly distraught at the sight.

O'Neill refused to move his sword so long as Daniel kept his eyes open and at his level. Then, surprising to all, Daniel's left arm swung around and landed on O'Neill shoulder and gripped it firmly. Before the bishop could even understand what was happening, he felt his body being brought closer. With it, his sword plunged deeper into Daniel's body as the two closed in on each other. O'Neill's expression grew worried as Daniel, despite expressing pain as the steel passed through his lung and began to pierce through his back, kept his gaze fixed on the bishop's regardless.

As O'Rourke's left arm fell away he leaned his head towards the bishop's, now close enough for the two to brush heads. O'Neill was silent, awestruck and mildly intimidated by the display. As Daniel's body twitched and a small cough brought the smell and sight of blood to his lips, he opened them to speak.

"Forgive me father...for I..."

He coughed again, small speckles of blood catching on O'Neill's cheek.

"For I have sinned."

The azure serenity of Daniel's eyes betrayed his action as his right hand, still holding the knife gathered what strength remained in his body, raised itself into the air, and plunged the blade into O'Neill's throat, pulling down a ways as the bishop began gagging for air and life as bright red blood spilled from the incision.

O'Neill fell back, pulling the sword from Daniel's body and letting both fall to the ground with a clank and thud respectively. He grasped the sight of O'Rourke's strike as the blood continued to pour, spilling over his fingers and onto the wood. Trembling, eyes bulging with fear, mouth hacking up blood and gargles of impending death, the man of faith collapsed to his knees and rolled into the water.

"Daniel!" Astrid darted forwards to be close to the deacon as he began to cough up blood fiercely, body convulsing as death approached it.

"Daniel no!" Astrid kneeled over his side, immediately drawing the attention of his blue eyes to hers. Blood was pulsing out of the sight of his wound from both the exit and entrance. Despite the obvious onset of death approaching, the blood stained lips of the deacon seemed calm. He was a man ready for the end.

"Daniel..." Her hand raised over his head, resting above his eyes that stayed stoic and resolute. Hers could not be as relaxed, and despite how much she didn't like it, she found a ready supply of tears to form at the corners of her own.

Hiccup, with the battle over and seeing his wife in distress, tried to get up. The sword at his leg prohibited him from standing to remove said blade. Instead, he relied on the advantage of being able to remove said fake leg, twisting it from its base and letting it be trapped as he crawled towards the dying deacon.

"s-s-s-strid."

Daniel half gargled with blood as he looked up at the Viking wife who had changed his life and vice versa. She remained silent at his call, too stricken with grief to speak.

O'Rourke broke eye contact a moment, knowing his bible to be right at the side of where he had fallen. With what rapidly failing strength he had, he reached out for the text. Though Astrid wanted to reach out to stop him, to let him rest, she knew as well as he that his death was inevitable, and let him perform whatever last rites she assumed him to be doing. He clutched the spine of the book weakly, and dragged it over to himself, resting his palm on it a moment before raising it up unsteadily, and pushing it towards Astrid. She kept still, amazed at the last burst of determination as the text neared her.

"As-strid." He managed between fresh coughs of blood. He let the book fall near her lap, his hand falling on it in turn. With a smile of serenity at feeling the embrace of death approach him, he once more beckoned Astrid to look at him. Her blue eyes, distorted by tears met

his own, looking at her unafraid and with an acceptance of what was to come.

"Into..."

He coughed again, a few droplets of blood leaping into the air moment before falling back upon him. Astrid kept attentive, wanting him to finish, his epitaph to be heard.

"Into...your hands I...I..."

He broke his gaze with her a moment to look at the bible placed at her knees. He looked back to her, her expression crumbling into grief and face convulsing with tears as he felt himself slipping away.

"Commit my...commit my..."

His head turned, looking towards the sky as the sun began its walk across the horizon for the day. His eyes closed, a smile though fading still present on him. Astrid leaned in close, trying to hear whatever sound would be the last to leave his lips. A soft brush of air, the last to escape from the deacon's body coasted by her ear on its way to the heavens above.

"Spirit."

Whatever control she had had over herself crumbled as a torrent of tearful emotion poured out of her, her arms laying across Daniel's body and head on his shoulder, body jolting with sobs.

Hiccup, keeping silent in what he understood to be a moment only for the two of them, pulled up on the opposite side of the body. He kept his composure, but knew Astrid's pain. The pain of sacrifice, of loss. The husband and wife stayed over the body several minutes, Hiccup allowing his wife all the time she needed to get out her immediate grief.

MacAfee, who had watched the entire confrontation, went back into his ship. He contemplated in the back of his mind that he may have had something to do with this tragedy he was seeing before him, and resolved that if this was true, it would be his supplies that would clean up after it.

Slowly, controlling a body that wanted only to curl up and cry away the day, Astrid rose from the deacon's body, wiping away the tears that remained on her face. She didn't look at Hiccup, too caught up in the moment to contemplate what he thought, nor did she care.

She reached behind her neck, where a black leather string was lifted over her hair, a silver cross coming up with it. She let it fall to her side and kept still a moment. She raised it up halfway, and let the cross climb its way up Daniel's body as she dragged the string towards his center.

To her surprise, she was stopped by Hiccup's hand as it reached out to her own, forcing it stop with the simple touch. She looked up to him, his eyes as concerned for her as for the deacon.

"No."

He whispered to her, not letting her escape his gaze. She couldn't stand him seeing her like this, but she didn't care at the moment. Emotions care little for later perceptions. She looked at him hard, almost angrily wondering what gave him the audacity to interrupt her mourning.

"He'd-He'd want you to have it."

Though tears did not burst forth from her this time, she broke from Hiccup's stare back down to the closed eyes of the deacon, body growing colder in its union with death each passing second. She gave a warbling sigh, indicative of the emotion still surging within her, and pulled the cross back towards her. She took it in her hand, and with a deadened expression pulled it back over her neck. After another quiet minute, she finally found her nerves momentarily calm enough and voice steady enough to look back at Hiccup, ever ready to tend to his wife's distress.

"You're-you're right."

Though he dared not smile, Hiccup appreciated that his wife was in agreement. The two broke eye contact again, and spent the next few minutes crouched over Daniel's body; scarred, bloody, and at peace.

16. Epilouge: Do This in Memory of Me

****Done.****

****Holy God I'm actually done.****

****This is the longest thing I have ever written, period. I didn't intend for it to get this long, but I suppose writing backwards from the last chapter without an outline or Beta can cause that... Gonna go back later when I have time and do some editing to this, condense chapters together, and overall making this look more professional.****

****Final thoughts, analysis etc. is appreciated. I am doing fanfiction to try and improve my skills as a writer, and feedback about my prose is appreciated as I try to better myself. ****

****I am now getting on to the sequel "Over the Hills and Far Away", for which I actually DO have an outline and Beta (The Writer Es). Ever wanted to see a story featuring Hiccup in the midst of the Crusades? Brace yourself for a whole new religious conflict that will test the recently adopted faith of the ever entertaining Hiccstrid! Also still looking for an artist to maybe collaborate with for this story; if you are interested please feel free to PM me.****

****Please Enjoy and keep your eyes peeled for the sequel.****

****Until then, Mc out.****

*** * ***

><p>Being a Viking by title alone was supposed to make one tough, resilient, impervious and steadfast against whatever hardship man or

nature threw at you. The extra thick fur cloak Hiccup held firmly over his already multiples layers of clothing against the biting winter winds was proof again that he was not as Viking as the rest of Berk. Snow, freshly fallen from the morning had formed a mostly unbroken blanket of white over Berk. Only the imprints of Hiccup's footsteps leading from his house to this small, isolated spot at the foot hills of Berk's mountain broke the uniform of white that enveloped the island.<p>

His cloak, standing as vanguard against the persistent wind slowly rocked back and forth around his legs as the breeze pushed against it. The bear fur gently nuzzled his body as it wrapped around him, shifting as the tight fit rocked against his breathing.

Before him, still standing resistant to the wind and-by Hiccup's actions- cleared of the snow that had fallen on an already high bank from two nights previous was a cross. The first to be erected on Berk. It was of simple construction, really just two straight and respectable enough looking sticks affixed to each other with rope. Hiccup's eyes remained fixed on it, occasionally wandering around its periphery to the hypnotizing uniformity of the pure snow that surrounded it.

His breath rose into the air in a thick cloud of condensing moisture as he exhaled. The wind was quick to blow into his mouth, nearly freezing his saliva and causing him to choke softly, not wanting to lose his composure at this moment. With his dignity restored and the wind dying down for the moment, he refocused on the cross, still and indifferent to the weather.

"She still misses you."

His voice was low but stern, unsure as to whether his words would actually be acknowledged by the pair of sticks before him.

"We-we all do."

There was not a response from the cross, but Hiccup continued to speak. His voice denoted a resistant strain of guilt he held on himself for the death of the man who was buried before him.

"It's been-It's been different with you gone. It's all changed so-so fast."

The wind rushed by his face, stopping him for a moment as he pulled his cloak close to himself. He resumed as the burst died down.

"She...she wishes you were still here. We all do."

He looked over his shoulder back towards the village.

"Well, most of us."

Hiccup stood quietly for the next few minutes over the cross, which had the merit of displaying inexhaustible patience as the chief looked for words to say to the crossed sticks. He hadn't visited the burial site much since the deacon was laid to rest soon after battle, chiefly duties and Berk's distinctively brutal winter being the most prohibitive factors. It had been the onset of a pretty brutal case of

cabin fever that had finally driven Hiccup out into the cold and to this isolated spot.

They hadn't known where exactly to bury him. Some had argued for Loki's ridge where they had first washed up. Others for the general burial plot on the far side of the island. Others had recommended a funeral pyre, and Eret, Son of Eret had gone so far as to recommend a full longship funeral be implemented for the great man.

It was Astrid's suggestion, of a hill side that in the summer and fall would bristle with freshly planted mint that was finally accepted as a suitable place of final rest. There were talks to build a better and sturdier marker for the space once the spring thaw came; and Hiccup had even sketched out an idea or two for it, much to Astrid's delight.

The wind kicked up again, and Hiccup kept the cloak close to him as the cold scraped across his cheek like the blow of a sword.

He had refought the battle over in his head more times than he could count, and he could count pretty high. Every time he tried to think of a way he could have struck at John earlier, caused a greater injury, possible opportunities to have made for O'Neill quickly. Ways he could have been able to unpin himself from the sword in his leg. Ways he could have fought one legged. Ways he could have stopped the fight.

Ways he could have stopped Daniel from dying.

Every single hypothetical he had about changing the fight never changed its real outcome. It couldn't change the fact that a few feet under the ground that was a few feet below all this snow, Daniel's body, a sword wound puncturing through his chest and out his back lay dead.

When the fire had been properly remedied-with only slight damage to the village-many had come down to the docks to inspect the explosion they had heard earlier. A crowd had gathered slowly around the center wharf, unsure of how to proceed upon seeing their chief and his strangely emotional wife hovering over a young Celt in black robes, a blood stained white cross running down his center.

When the followers of Daniel had started to show up in numbers of their own, they joined Astrid in the outpouring of grief over his body. It had mostly been women, as Berkian men had to live up to their reputation of stoicism and resolve. That didn't stop a few from shedding a wayward drop their eyes. Hiccup had remained quiet throughout that time, keeping close to his wife to comfort her, but letting her expel her misery as she wanted.

It had taken a good twenty minutes of reflection and public sadness before Hiccup crawled his way back to his leg and with some effort removed the sword from it. He affixed it, rose, and addressed the large crowd that had by that point gathered to tell them of what had happened.

In the meantime, Matthew and Mark had been pulled from the waters; burned, injured and in terrible pain. They were presented to Hiccup shortly after his explanation of the battle, swords at the ready by their necks. In the spirit of the deacon, he had ordered for them to

be given medical attention instead. John's body, so riddled with holes from the brief battle with Astrid had sunk to the ocean floor below, and was not looked for nor retrieved.

O'Neill's body, deformed by the waves and loss of all blood washed up onto the beach the next morning. As the start of a lengthy punishment for Snotlout, he was ordered to personally fly it out into the Northern Waters and let it fall there.

MacAfee's pleas for mercy and restitution for his part in the ordeal were not well received by most of the village regardless of creed. He had been forced to relinquish all that he purchased without refund back to the village, and was currently being imprisoned for the winter. Come Spring, Hiccup was intending to make a deal with him on setting up a more suitable trade arrangement between Berk and MacAfee's native DownPatrick, and he was hoping that maybe the trader could do some good in explaining the great Human-Dragon experiment that was Berk.

Daniel's funeral had been an interesting affair. The same night as the battle, his body, freshly prepared with what mountain mint could be gathered from supply stocks was brought up to where he now lay. Unfamiliar with the proper way to bury this man of a different faith, it had been a quiet affair as the hole was dug and his body brought in with as much reverence as could be given to such a man. Eret and a few other of the followers had performed the honors, and several went about saying prayers to their new God to look after the man in the afterlife. Even Hiccup had offered some words, not to any deity but to his tribe, on his respect to the man, this man who had done everything he could to become a part of the village and make the village a part of him.

A man who had died fighting for a village he had believed in.

For a single person he had befriended.

Hiccup's head fell back into the head of his cloak as he pulled it close to him.

"Thank you...for saving my wife."

Astrid had taken the death rougher than anyone else, with perhaps Eret, Son of Eret being the only one to rival her emotional output that day. While after a few weeks she had mostly recovered and returned to normal life as all do, Hiccup could still sense her grief at the deacon's absence. She had worn his cross every day since, and the golden brooch as often as she could.

If she was at home, he would often walk in on her looking over Daniel's bible. Though unable to read a word of the Latin, she still admired the illuminated illustrations, the carefully written text and the construction of the text. Luke would sometimes help her read with his own knowledge of the language, albeit his understanding was not at the scholarly level of the deacon. Still, she was comforted by what could be gleaned from the text, and kept close tabs on it whenever it was borrowed by Eret, Son of Eret.

After a few days she had told Hiccup of her last night with Daniel, about his confession of affection and her reciprocal kiss. He was patient and more than forgiving of the innocent gesture. If anything,

the story to him was evidence of the deacon's control of his character than his lack thereof.

"She's...very grateful."

He closed his eyes a moment, considering his words.

"We all are."

He opened his green orbs to the blinding white of the snow again.

"Thank you...for everything."

The cross leaned ever so slightly at a strong gust of wind. Hiccup pulled the cloak close again, head fallen in a dignified and reserved mourning.

"I just...I just wish you didn't have to die as a result."

"Don't we all?"

A distinctive voice, speaking Norse but openly showing that the speaker held Gaelic as his native tongue came from a few feet behind Hiccup. He turned to see O'Gara tracing the chief's footsteps as he trudged through the snow, a heavy fur cloak of his own testament to his own un-vikingness.

"Luke."

"Chief."

The two greeted each other as O'Gara took a position to Hiccup's side, eyes fixed on the cross.

"How's the scar?"

"Still itches like Hell but overall getting better."

Hiccup huffed in minor amusement at the knight's lack of care for his injury.

"How's Eret treating you?"

"Still more than hospitable, especially now that I can finally help him with some of the house chores."

"And Ruffnut?"

Luke let out a chuckle at the addressing of what had become an issue of peculiar interest to the rest of the village.

"Still checking up on you every day?"

"Sometimes twice. Once to see me, another time _mostly_ for Eret."

"That's good."

"Yeah."

The two kept quiet for a moment before the cross, letting their mild amusement uplift their spirits before the solemn reminder of two months ago.

"How are the brothers doing?"

Though Hiccup had initially checked up on them daily in the first few weeks following the battle, he had done so less frequently as he got all the information he could out of them with O'Gara's assistance as translator. The knight still visited the two-taken in somewhat reluctantly by Helga- with regularity, both to see to their injuries and to keep company with them. Irishmen were still Irish, regardless of their pasts.

"Matthew's face is getting less red and his leg is healing well enough to the point that he's starting to walk. Mark's arm is getting infected again though, might have to amputate this time."

"They enjoying the Terrible Terror I gave them?" Hiccup smirked at the sight the brothers were in when he had nonchalantly walked into their room of recovery a month ago and given them a small dragon to befriend.

"They finally settled on a name. Call it _Cu_, and are freaking inseparable from it."

"Good. Agnes warming up to you?"

After O'Gara had recovered sufficiently, Hiccup and Eret had agreed that the knight deserved a dragon of its own in recognition to his acceptance of Berk and disloyalty to the bishop. The knight had settled on a female burgundy Timberjack that had taken to him fondly, although this fondness could often be manifested in less than benign ways.

"Well she hasn't nearly sliced me in half me in four days now, so I'd say we're getting along. Also found out she loves getting scratched gently with a sword blade. Might want to take note of that."

"Ha. I will."

The two refrained from talking again as another burst of cold air ripped across the open field. The longer they stayed, the more they both looked at the cross before them, ever observant to their conversation. A minute passed before Hiccup, renewed with melancholy spoke again.

"Why do good men have to die Luke?" The heavy question caught the knight off guard a moment before he composed an appropriate response.

"Well...I guess if they didn't the rest of us wouldn't know what to die for."

Hiccup sighed at the response, concise and to the point yet holding in it enough implications to satisfy a nation of philosophers for days. Typically Irish.

"I guess so." He exhaled into the air, his breath slowly rising in a

visible and wafting cloud.

"I hear the congregation is still holding on."

"Yeah, although we all acknowledge I'm not the man Daniel was."

Luke had taken on most of the duties Daniel would have provided could he have led a true church on Berk. The group met almost daily in the great hall to hear what O'Gara could tell them about Christendom, and an occasional anecdote about Ireland in particular. Still, Luke's vocation was as a warrior, not a scholar, and he could only speak of faith for so long.

Astrid had become privy to their meetings on occasions where she was free, bringing them the bible to look over. In following Daniel's last wish, she had become one of their leaders along with Eret, Son of Eret and Luke. She was keeping the memory of the man alive through the winter months. Though a small part of Hiccup had held out a vain hope that this whole business would go away by Snoggletog, Luke's bringing the congregation together to celebrate a similar winter holiday special to Christians a week ago had made him accept that the faith was not going to go away. He was coming to accept this, albeit slowly.

"You think we'll find another man like him?" Hiccup asked, genuinely interested and holding out hope that somewhere in the lands to the South there existed at least one man equal to Daniel's stature and sophistication.

"Ehhh...When I was in Dublin a year ago I ran into a priest named Macintyre, he seemed reasonable enough."

"Guess I know where I'm sending Snotlout next."

"Ha." O'Gara snickered at the remark, drawing a slightly sadistic appreciation that the man who had both tried to end and had still saved his life was getting his just punishment. He chuckled for a moment before falling to silence for another just as long.

"So, how's Astrid doing?"

"Well enough."

"Good." Luke replied, as aware of the rest of the village that the effect of Daniel's death had had on her. He had heard the story of the night before the battle from Eret, who had heard it from Hiccup, who had been telling it to Gobber.

At least he died without enemies. Was all the knight could think.

He had heard of Daniel's death shortly before the burial, and said his last goodbyes from the front stoop of Hiccup's house, too weak from his injury to partake in the funeral and only standing with Valka's assistance. He had his own guilt over not doing more. If he had just been faster that morning, if he could have found a way to get a sword from one of the others, if he had just been wise enough not to let himself get so easily surrounded. It was in the past, but Luke knew he would probably relive the experience in his head as long as he lived.

"So...what about you?"

Luke was broken from his introspective guilt by Hiccup's question.

"How do you mean?"

"You going to stay once Spring comes and the sea ice melts?" Hiccup turned to the knight, interested in his response.

"Well I can't just up and leave my girl can I?"

"And what about Agnes?"

"Who'd you think I was talking about?"

Hiccup managed a sincere chuckle at the quip as O'Gara continued.

"Besides, I can't go back." O'Gara paused, his voice recalling words of his friend who lay dead before him. "I can't go back to the fighting, the warfare, the fear, the mistrust. Not now that I've seen all...this." He extended his arms to Berk's peak, just noticeable enough by its outline against the cloud covered sky and snow enveloped sides.

"You just gestured to my entire island."

"Aye that I did."

The two stood contentedly once more over the cross, at ease with each other's presence. Their cloaks wavered gently in the wind, which picked up once more, throwing loose powder across the field.

"Although I'm sure I'm not the first to say that it's really freaking cold here."

"Head to the hall for some mead?"

The knight turned with a smirk to the chief, his new chief with a mouth craving the islands notably well made alcohol.

"With pleasure."

The two turned and made their own sets of individual foot prints into the snow as they descended the hill, a small wooden cross watching them amidst the snow and appreciative of their momentary presence.

* * *

><p>It had taken an entire week of fair weather to convince Berk that Winter had finally died and that Spring was here to stay. Small flocks of birds had begun their return and were providing plenty of good prey for the Terrible Terrors. The wind had changed from a bitingly cold assault on the skin to a gentle and calming whisper.<p>

Despite this, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, chief of Berk really

wished he had a shirt on. At least something more than just his pants. Astrid had insisted on the show of virility and masculinity. While sitting on a rock at the beach with Astrid was a mostly pleasant occasion regardless of when or where, the air was still just cool enough coming off the water to make one long for clothing.

The entire village had turned out for the occasion, a momentous one that had been talked about and prepared for through the winter and those intolerable few weeks without snow but persistently freezing temperatures that precedes the thaw. Those that were joining the chief and his wife in the ceremony were on the beach, the rest of the men also shirtless in what was to them a much more easy example of classic Viking fortitude against the cold. The rest who had already gone through the ceremony last Fall stood on the cliffs above.

Astrid sat aside from Hiccup, enveloped in a simple white dress that even she had to concede was not much protection against the cool air. The only object that added any notoriety or sense of luxury to the simple vestment was a broach affixed just above her heart. It consisted of three golden triangles, looping around each other, each point of connection marked with a small emerald. Her arm was wrapped around Hiccup's neck, providing some extra warmth for the two.

Toothless sat attentive next to the two. A white cross had been drawn on the top of his head with chalk for the occasion. Hiccup couldn't help but notice how similar it looked on the head of his best friend as it did on the chest of man who laid in rest in a recently thawed field just below the mountain.

At the shoreline, Eret, Son of Eret was working with two Irishmen. The younger, in his late 30's was enjoying his new set of black garments crafted after those worn by a now deceased friend of his. His brown hair was persistently well trimmed in keeping with his history as a warrior. He was going about to make sure enough oil had been gathered for the occasion. The necessary water was taken care of by the expanse of Nordic waters that encircled the island.

The other was a recent arrival from Dublin. He had only been on Berk a few weeks, but had adjusted quite well in such a short amount of time. Luke had been right about his character, and the priest, nearing fifty with short red hair that was showing signs of graying had become a welcome addition to the island.

"You know you don't have to do this." Astrid started. Hiccup groaned at having an issue he had thought settled brought up again.

"I've told you a hundred times it would make this whole thing easier. And given the amount of people that have turned out, I'd say I was right."

Astrid smirked at her husband's confidence. She knew that he had grown convinced enough of the merits of the decision that he wouldn't be changing his mind. There was still a nagging thought at the back of her mind that he was only doing this to make her happy; but these notions were often dissuaded by remembering how he had made sure to keep the spiritual fires lit by one dark haired Celt last Autumn burning through the winter.

She wasn't sure whether it was because he truly believed as much as she did-though he had come to show some signs of piety in the last few months-or if this was all because her life had been saved by the man who had brought this new faith to the island. Either way, she had been looking forward to this moment since the first one-off day of not deathly freezing weather a month back.

"We really couldn't have picked a warmer day to do this couldn't we?" Hiccup groaned as a small gust of wind raised the hair on his chest as it came off the water and struck the cliff face beside them.

"Hey, you're the one that wanted to "lead the way and get this over with"." Astrid made a nasally voice to make light of her husband's statements about the occasions that had been building up the past few days.

"I do not sound like that. But yeah...I guess I kind of did."

"Yeah, and yes you do."

"Do not."

"Do too."

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

Hiccup raised and arm and took Astrid's chin in his hand, pulling it towards him for a brief, playful kiss.

"Do...not."

"Fine, you win again."

They exchanged a momentary look of content before Norse in a thick Gaelic accent disturbed them from the peace of the moment.

"If you two are ready...it's time to begin." O'Gara let on with a playful grin. Hiccup and Astrid both gathered themselves, took a breath and got up from their place of leisure.

Toothless watched them curiously. He knew that something benign was happening to his host and his mate, but could not understand why he was not being allowed to join in, and why he was wearing a white racing stripe on his face if they weren't racing. Besides, the dragon preferred red more, it looked more flattering on him.

Astrid helped Hiccup navigate the sand, the one surface that no prosthetic could seem to traverse very well. They made their way, arms wrapped over each other's shoulders towards the fairly calm waters. Macintyre had already waded out a few dozen yards, a jar in his hand. Luke gestured with his hand to the waters. Hiccup paused just as a wave gently rolled onto his bare foot. Knowing that the muck below the waves would be even more difficult to cross, he looked with an honorable plea to O'Gara, who understood completely. Hiccup swung his other free arm over the knight's shoulder, and the three began their march out into the sea.

They sloshed through the water, Astrid and Luke having to support Hiccup as his metal leg kept sinking back into the mud beneath them. Macintyre could sense their trouble, and got closer, the two parties meeting at distance still deep enough to properly perform the ritual without being too shallow.

As the four joined, the crowds that had been watching fell quiet, looking to their chief for guidance and leadership. Hiccup turned to face them, exuding determination and beckoning the eyes of his villagers to him.

Macintyre stood before them on his side, hoping to make the ritual as visible as possible to the villagers who would be following the chief. He began his recitations in Latin and started asking the pair questions on belief and rejecting evil.

Hiccup agreed to each one and Astrid did so in turn. He more so just allowed his voice to go through the motions, keeping his eyes fixed on the droves of his fellow Berkians on the shore who watched him.

He was doing this for them. He was doing this for the rest of his village. He was doing this for the woman he loved.

He was doing this for the memory of his father. In memory of a man who was put in an equally difficult position.

And for another man who had put him in this position in the first place.

Macintyre continued in his proclamations, incantations and recitations before the two. Hiccup's left hand fell to his side, freeing him from Astrid's shoulder as he established firmer footing on the sand below him. Astrid's arm fell from Hiccup's shoulder respectively, and the two interlocked their hands as Macintyre began to close in on the big moment.

No turning back.

He managed a quick glance over to Astrid, who reciprocated with a smile.

She had thought about this moment since after Daniel's death, had talked it over with Eret, Son of Eret, had talked with Hiccup about it and everything it would mean for the past few weeks. Now it was actually happening.

"...With this oil..."

The priest dipped some of the fish oil in the jar onto Hiccup's head first, the thick liquid dripping down the front of his forehead and over his nose, his eyes closing to avoid contact with the syrup. He wasn't sure why, but it was a rather soothing sensation. He could feel the village watching him, could feel Toothless watching him. Still, their stares meant nothing to him as his heart began to race, pumping with excitement at this new change to his life.

Macintyre then moved to Astrid, who arced her head back slightly and let the oil flow instead onto her hair. The cool liquid seeped into her scalp, her eyes closed a moment to enjoy the feeling and her last

moments as the old Astrid Haddock, prepared to feel the ocean waters turn her into someone knew, in honor of someone she wanted to be like.

No turning back.

"...I, Domnall Macintyre baptize both of you, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III and Astrid Hofferson Haddock in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

Macintyre took Astrid's back with his hand, and cued Luke with a nod to proceed. With a barely open eye, Hiccup caught one last look at his wife as the two, hands joined and guided by Irish precision, were immersed into the waters. The liquid wrapped around their bodies a brief few seconds, a cold and stimulating presence before they were pulled back up from beneath the waves, water being flung from their bodies as they rose back into the sunlight.

Both batted their eyes as they brushed away the salt water and a raucous noise of applause and respect arose from the shoreline. Toothless watched the two perplexed, but knowing that whatever was happening was obviously something to which the rest of the humans approved of, and so he did the same.

Hiccup glared through the water still rushing down his face his arm and traced it to where his hand met with Astrid's. He followed up her own arm to her face, drenched in oil and water but brimming with joy. The sun glowed unimpeded by clouds over the ocean, shining brilliantly at its apex.

God had smiled on them this day.

End
file.